

Conscience as a Phenomenon in Shakespeare's *Richard III* and *Macbeth*

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List of Abbreviations

<i>OED</i> :	<i>Oxford English Dictionary Online</i> , 2 nd edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).
<i>Geneva Bible</i> :	<i>The Geneva Bible : a Facsimile of the 1560 Edition</i> , introd. by Lloyd E. Berry (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969).
Tilley:	Tilley, Morris Palmer, <i>A Dictionary of the Proverbs in England in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries: a Collection of the Proverbs Found in English Literature and the Dictionaries of the Period</i> (Anne Arbor: 1950).

All quotations from the works of William Shakespeare are, with the exception of specific references to other editions, taken from:

The Riverside Shakespeare, 2nd edition, gen. ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1997).

List of Illustrations

Ill. A, p. 60:	‘Råd og Uråd’, <i>Donald Duck & Co</i> , 32 (Hjemmet – Bladforlaget: 1980), 7.
Ill. B, p. 60:	‘Sirkusdilla’, <i>Donald Duck & Co</i> , 14 (Hjemmet – Bladforlaget: 1984), 7.
Ill. C, p. 78:	<i>The N-Town Plays: A Facsimile of British Library MS Cotton Vespasian D VIII</i> , introduction by Peter Meredith and Stanley J. Kahrl (Leeds: University of Leeds, 1977), p. 178, I.
Ill D, p. 78:	<i>The N-Town Plays</i> , p. 176, I.

Introduction

In the early stages of working with this thesis, I set out with a desire to investigate John S. Wilks's claim that 'a gradual metamorphosis is discernable in the treatment of the idea of conscience from the substantially scholastic form that it takes in the works of Shakespeare, to a predominantly reformist conception in the works of his later contemporaries and Jacobean successors'.¹ The initial project was to disprove Wilks's claim, by showing that while conscience in *Richard III* conformed to a medieval, scholastic notion of conscience, conscience in *Macbeth* seemed to be much more influenced by reformist theology and ideology. In retrospect, I do not believe either claim is true, or that it is possible to make a sufficiently convincing argument for any of them. I think Wilks and I posed the wrong question, one which is impossible to answer: Why is conscience represented differently in *Richard III* and *Macbeth*? The evidence of cultural, political, religious, and censorial influences on Shakespeare is scarce. There is no evidence of autobiographical references to conscience in Shakespeare's work, and we cannot know how the context of the plays affected the treatment of themes: *Richard III* is set in England in the late fourteenth century and it is difficult to establish how its treatment of conscience is bound by the historical treatment in More, Hall, and Holinshed. Does Shakespeare present us with a fourteenth-century or a late sixteenth-century notion of conscience? *Macbeth*, set in Scotland in the eleventh century, may have left Shakespeare freer to develop his own ideas about conscience, as he relied less than in *Richard III* on his sources in shaping the characters and plot of the play. This apparent creative freedom may suggest that Shakespeare presents us with a more contemporary notion of conscience and the workings of the mind, but it remains difficult to ascertain the impact of

¹ John S. Wilks, *The Idea of Conscience in Renaissance Tragedy* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 6.

the stricter censorship of the Jacobean period.² The different contexts of *Richard III* and *Macbeth* make a comparison very difficult, at least as long as the question is *why* conscience is presented as it is. The appropriate question must be *how* conscience is presented differently, which has led me to a phenomenological treatment of conscience. The purpose is to investigate how conscience is presented, what the properties of conscience are, and how it affects the actions and the state of mind of the characters.

There is little recent critical work on conscience in Shakespeare's plays; the most recent thorough analysis is John S. Wilks's *The Idea of Conscience in Renaissance Tragedy*. Wilks draws an ideological distinction between Shakespeare's 'scholastic' notion of conscience and his later contemporaries' 'reformist' conception of the same. According to Wilks, Shakespeare is informed by the scholastic concept of Natural Law as the universal moral order, and sees conscience as a faculty of the mind which witnesses the trespassing of Natural Law:

This conception [of transcendental order] released [Shakespeare] to a consideration of justice organically conceived, by which man is punished by his sins, rather than for his sins, and by which the Old Testament theology of the Chroniclers is augmented by a scholastic conception of the Natural Law, and an examination of causes located primarily in the affairs of men. It is this system of moral order, only imperfectly actualized here [i.e. in *Richard III*], which comes eventually to sustain the universe of Shakespeare's mature tragedies; an order where infringement is witnessed to in the commonwealth as an act of purgative reaction, and in the individual as an act of conscience.³

How is a 'system of moral order' identified in a play? With respect to *Macbeth* or *King Lear*, Wilks may think of the metaphysical reality which asserts itself in the world of these plays. Natural or supernatural forces are directly influenced by the disappearance of the King, either by abdication or murder, and the King is important to the internal balance of these worlds. However, that these worlds have a certain metaphysical structure does not necessitate a 'system of moral order', and Wilks produces nothing to suggest that conscience in *Macbeth*

² It is possible that the play has been cut as a result of censorship, but the fact that this is Shakespeare's shortest play has also been attributed to King James VI's alleged preference for short plays. See Kenneth Muir's introduction to the Arden edition for a thorough discussion of the changes to the text.

³ Wilks, *The Idea of Conscience*, pp. 98-9.

extends beyond the personal and psychological. Conscience in *Macbeth* is not an act of witnessing infringement of moral order, to paraphrase Wilks; it is a passive faculty, resisting action, which is induced by fear and which responds to the trespassing of personal and particular rather than universal boundaries of acceptable actions. The same action produces different effects in different people because moral boundaries are different for each individual. For instance, the murderers of Banquo seem unaffected by what they have done, whereas Clarence's second murderer suffers qualms before the act and repents it afterwards.⁴ Wilks appears to subscribe to Tillyard's idea of the Elizabethan world picture, in which the universe, and consequently the moral universe, was thought to be ordered by universal, organic principles. This idea is reflected in Wilks's treatment of *Hamlet*, of which he writes:

The havoc and chaos of the general slaughter is not without ethical significance, since it marks the final analeptic convulsion by which the moral order reconstitutes itself, and by which the disease represented by Claudius [...] is by 'desperate appliance' finally relieved. In fine, the apparently haphazard sequence of chance and coincidence that preserves Hamlet for a last and fatal duty [...] would have demonstrated to an Elizabethan audience, as it does distortedly to Hamlet, a moral design in the economy of natural causes through which a divinity works, indirectly shaping events, and, through an immanent and proximate pressure upon the matrices of fortune and human free will, conforming them ultimately to its own inscrutable purposes.⁵

Wilks's treatment of the evolution of 'the character of conscience as depicted in Tudor interludes and morality plays' emerges as an informed and concise discussion, and constitutes the better part of this work. Together with Theodore Spencer's *Shakespeare and the Nature of Man*, it inspired me to include my own chapter on the theatrical traditions of conscience.

Less dense and more intelligible is Willem Herman Toppen's analysis of conscience in *Macbeth*.⁶ Toppen's aim in his book 'is to concentrate on the function of conscience in *Macbeth*',⁷ which is similar to the aim of this thesis. Toppen is likewise concerned with the 'phenomena associated with conscience',⁸ and the phenomenological approach is perhaps necessary in order to accommodate the fact that the word 'conscience' does not appear in the

⁴ We should, however, allow for the possibility that the parts of Banquo's murderers have been cut (due to the brevity of the play), and that their doubts may have been voiced in an earlier text.

⁵ Wilks, *The Idea of Conscience*, p. 124.

⁶ Willem Herman Toppen, *Conscience in Shakespeare's Macbeth* (Groningen: J. B. Wolters, 1962).

⁷ Toppen, *Conscience*, p. ix.

⁸ Toppen, *Conscience*, p. ix.

play. The first two chapters are concerned with ‘Elizabethan views on the function of the human conscience’ and its divine origin,⁹ and ‘whether conscience, being a vital function of the human *character*, is a legitimate subject in a discussion of a work of literature’.¹⁰ Although an interesting question, it appears to me that Toppen fails to answer it, as the chapter is a general discussion of ‘character drama’. His argument in chapter six is that Shakespeare was not concerned with psychological plausibility, only plots and striking effects. The chapter is unnecessarily apologetic because, in my opinion, *Macbeth* is psychologically plausible. Toppen suggests that Shakespeare is looking to create striking theatrical effects, like Lady Macbeth’s sleepwalking, but emphasis should also fall on Shakespeare’s effort to create poetic effects. The play absorbs the spectator or the reader because it captures essential truths about the human condition which stir our imaginations, not mere theatrical tricks which stir our senses. Toppen recognizes the import of William Perkins’ writings on *Macbeth*, and together with John S. Wilks he pointed me in the direction of Perkins’ *The Whole Treatise of the Cases of Conscience*, which I discuss in relation to *Macbeth* in chapter three.

Probably the least useful book about conscience in Shakespeare’s plays is G. S. Ghurye’s *Shakespeare on Conscience and Justice*, although the author is very good with numbers. Ghurye takes a numerological approach to the subject, listing how many occurrences there are of words such as ‘conscience’, ‘fear’ and ‘blood’ in each play. These lists appear first as curious facts, but the approach becomes tiresome after a few pages, especially as the author is not able to argue why this method is useful. Ghurye describes his mission in the following words: ‘my task is to study Shakespeare’s concept of conscience and his handling of it to give conscience the status it deserved and later came to have in English

⁹ Toppen, *Conscience*, p. xxi.

¹⁰ Toppen, *Conscience*, p. xxii.

culture'.¹¹ The author makes three awkward assumptions in this statement: first, that conscience was not treated seriously before Shakespeare introduced it as a theme in his plays (thus ignoring the literature of Shakespeare's contemporaries and predecessors, of which Ghurye displays no knowledge). Secondly, that it was Shakespeare alone who made conscience an important subject in his own time; and thirdly, that conscience has an implicit 'deserved status' as an important topic, irrespective of whether someone was writing about it or not. These assumptions point towards an absolutist attitude which ignores theatrical traditions and changes in cultural values, and sees the values inherent in the plays through a present-day perspective. The author makes several bold statements in this book without backing them up with evidence, for instance: 'The Ghost of Banquo in *Macbeth* is manifest only to Macbeth, the sponsor of the murder of Banquo [...] The ghost, therefore, must be considered to be a hallucinatory phenomenon, created by the guilty conscience and a perturbed and excited mind'.¹² Ghurye needs no further evidence to prove that the ghost is a hallucination than that Macbeth is the only spectator. Further on, Ghurye discusses Lady Macbeth's reference to remorse in *Macbeth*, 1.5.44, and argues that 'In the context, it is clear, "remorse" means more pity than the self-reproach coming after the perpetration of an evil deed'.¹³ He fails, however, to show why this is so obvious (which is far from the case, in my opinion). The main problem with the book is that the treatment of conscience seems haphazard and without purpose, which is reflected in his vague mission statement: 'to study Shakespeare's concept of conscience and his handling of it'. Despite the book's many flaws, Ghurye makes one insightful observation about the authority of conscience: it is largely 'inhibitionary and negativizing rather than actionist and positivist'.¹⁴ This draws a similar contrast between conscience and action as Franco Moretti's article 'The Great Eclipse: Tragic

¹¹ G. S. Ghurye, *Shakespeare on Conscience and Justice* (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1965), p. 46.

¹² Ghurye, *Shakespeare on Conscience*, p. 41.

¹³ Ghurye, *Shakespeare on Conscience*, p. 123.

¹⁴ Ghurye, *Shakespeare on Conscience*, p. 157.

Form as the Deconsecration of Sovereignty', which is referred to in chapter three. Moretti argues that scrupulous deliberation is not a process which leads to action; rather action is a passionate response to conscience's demand for passivity.

Of these three books, Toppen's has the most sensible approach. Wilks's perspective is too wide, engaging too much with religious literature and too little with the plays. Ghurye's perspective is too narrow: he focuses on conscience in Shakespeare's plays, but the analysis is flawed and lacks references to other material. The focus of all three books is on conscience as an exclusively moral category. My analysis of conscience in *Richard III* and *Macbeth* also investigates other applications of the word and addresses conscience as a phenomenon of human character rather than an exclusively religious concept.

In the first chapter, I look at the lexical occurrences of conscience in various works of Shakespeare and discuss the different meanings of the word. As will be shown, conscience is not only invoked as a moral category, but has several applications ranging from intellect, judgment and opinion to transferred applications in which, for instance, conscience shares the qualities of a flexible container or a suit of armour. I have also examined puns involving guilt, gold and blood which draw attention to conscience as a burden of sin, and to repentance through satisfaction in form of money or punishment. The location of conscience in the body is also discussed, and the citations emphasize the Elizabethan preoccupation with bodily functions and the interrelationship between body and soul. Finally, an analysis of conscience in *The Tempest* may indicate contemporary scepticism to the relevance of conscience in a universe in which people believe in predetermination, but at the same time adheres to the concept of Man's free will. These two conditions constitute an unresolved paradox, as the doctrine of predetermination limits the possibility of free will. The discussion of *The Tempest* addresses the implication of this paradox for conscience.

The various meanings of ‘conscience’ described in chapter one highlight the ambiguity and flexibility of the word, and enjoin caution in attributing moral significance to conscience in all its contexts. Whereas this may be very relevant to *Richard III*, it is not so relevant to *Macbeth*, where the word ‘conscience’ is not used at all. When writing about conscience in *Macbeth*, it was necessary to approach it as a moral concept similar to the modern meaning of the word. *Macbeth* describes the psychological impact of murder on Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, and my goal has been to show how conscience manifests itself in the play as a phenomenon. I have compared the play to other texts, most notably the theologian William Perkins’ revised treatise on conscience, *The Whole Treatise of the Cases of Conscience*, published a few years prior to *Macbeth*. The treatise describes the causes, symptoms, and effects of a guilty conscience and the descriptions often correspond to the text of *Macbeth*. Furthermore, I have pointed out similarities between *Macbeth*, Shakespeare’s *The Rape of Lucrece*, and Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex*, similarities which are relevant to the theme of conscience.

The focus of chapter two is the theatrical tradition, and how conscience was represented dramatically before Shakespeare’s time. The topic is addressed by a number of critics, for instance Theodore Spencer, Bernard Spivack, John S. Wilks, Anne Righter and A. P. Rossiter.¹⁵ My discussion shows how conscience has evolved from a personified virtue in the medieval plays to becoming an abstract subject of a more naturalistic, psychological drama in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century. Still, certain remnants of the past are present in *Richard III*, in which Richard shows affinity with another personification from the medieval plays, the Vice. Conscience in *Richard III* also appears to be influenced by ideas

¹⁵ Theodore Spencer, *Shakespeare and the Nature of Man* (New York: Macmillan, 1942); Bernard Spivack, *Shakespeare and the Allegory of Evil: The History of a Metaphor in Relation to his Major Villains* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958); Wilks, *The Idea of Conscience*; Anne Righter, *Shakespeare and the Idea of the Play* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1962); and Arthur Percival Rossiter, *English Drama From Early Times to the Elizabethans: its Background, Origins and Developments*, Hutchinson University Library. English literature, 74 (London: Hutchinson, 1950).

of conscience in the old plays, as it is represented as an external agent which operates on the outside of the characters in the play. This externality in *Richard III* is shown through the distinctive material representation of conscience, as conscience is likened to a spirit, 'arms', tongues, and is manifested through the presence of ghosts. Conscience in *Macbeth*, on the other hand, emerges as an internal faculty of human nature, and is represented through the actions and reactions of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. These differences in representation coincide with a different emphasis on the function of conscience in the plays. In *Richard III*, conscience is first and foremost a witness of sin, and its function is to testify against the subject in a heavenly trial. In *Macbeth*, conscience functions mainly as the internal knowledge of sin, which drives the subject to repentance or despair.

What both plays have in common is the protagonist's struggle with his conscience, but the struggles of Richard and Macbeth are different, as their consciences are different: Richard fights against an outside conscience, which may be, as he calls it, 'but a word that cowards use', an abstract concept of morality; or a spiritual presence which attempts to influence his actions and shake his resolve. Macbeth, on the other hand, fights against a part of his own human nature, as conscience is represented as an internal aspect of his soul. As they struggle, Richard and Macbeth go through different developments: Richard appears to become more human as the play progresses, whereas Macbeth is a noble individual who gradually degenerates. In the early scenes, he is referred to as a brave, noble and worthy 'gentleman' (*Macbeth*, 1.2.16,24,67), whereas towards the end he is described as an 'abhorred tyrant', 'hell-hound' and bloody villain (*Macbeth*, 5.7.10; 5.8.3,7). In my view, Richard triumphs over conscience, as he refuses to adhere to the command of the apparitions, 'Despair, and die', and yet manages to retain his humanity. Macbeth also triumphs in the end as he, rather than following the prescribed formula of conscience which is to despair or repent, chooses to assert

his will and die defiant. It is an endeavour which should deprive him of his humanity, but he, like Richard, retains his humanity to the end.

The demises of Richard and Macbeth emphasize the conflict between the individual will and the precepts of conscience. This struggle relates to another conflict between determinism and free will, a conflict which is dominant in both plays. Both protagonists are ‘determined’ in one sense or another, which is revealed through prophecies, predictions, curses, or in a meta-theatrical sense, the known historical outcome of the story. At the same time, both plays are contained within a Christian universe or reality, of which Man’s free will is a defining characteristic. In both plays, conscience relates to an inherent value system which can be more or less explicit, but may ultimately be viewed as an expression of God’s will revealed to Man. Conscience, then, may be viewed as an agent of determinism, as it limits the effectiveness of free will. In my view, Richard and Macbeth prove themselves tragic heroes in making independent choices despite the apparent providentialism of the plays.

I have not attempted to fully answer the question of how conscience was understood by Shakespeare’s contemporaries. The evidence suggests, however, that there was substantial theological interest in the subject in the early seventeenth century. William Perkins published two treatises on the subject, *A Discourse of Conscience* (1597) and the already mentioned *The Whole Treatise of the Cases of Conscience* (published 1606 in Cambridge, 1611 in London). Other notable theological works are Jeremiah Dyke’s *Good Conscience: Or a Treatise Shewing the Nature, Meanes, Marks, Benefit and Necessity Thereof* (1624) and Ephraim Huit’s *The Anatomy of Conscience* (1626).¹⁶ These treatises were probably not read by the great majority of the people, but they likely formed the content of many sermons, as the writers themselves were preachers. This interest in conscience is also reflected in dramatic works of the same period, such as in the plays treated in John S. Wilks’s book: Marlowe’s

¹⁶ Wilks, *The Idea of Conscience*, p. 5.

Doctor Faustus (1588-9), Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1600-1), Tourneur's *The Atheist's Tragedy* (1611), and Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* (1613-4). The interest in conscience appears to coincide with greater psychological depth in the representation of character, and the discussion of conscience is likely to have gained importance as psychological realism and insight into the characters' minds became increasingly common. The attention conscience receives in the contemporary media shows that there was a need in this period for debates and discourses around conscience.

The following discussion attempts to demonstrate conscience in Shakespeare's drama to be a more diverse concept than its modern counterpart. Hopefully, it may cast new light on interpretations of the texts, for instance on the role of the equivocator in *Macbeth*, the theatrical tradition's influence on *Richard III*, the representation of ghosts and dreams, and the individual occurrences of the word itself in the works of Shakespeare.

Chapter One: Variants of Conscience in Shakespeare

It is the object of this thesis to explore the idea of conscience in *Richard III* and *Macbeth*. Just what is conscience in Shakespeare's plays? It is a term with strong Christian connotations in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century, yet it also occurs as a theme in Shakespeare plays with a pre-Christian setting, such as *Titus Andronicus* and *Julius Caesar*. Conscience appears to have different properties and functions in Catholic and Protestant theology in the English Renaissance. Shakespeare also describes differing concepts of conscience in a period when popular belief was a mixture of old and new ideas, Christian as well as pagan. In order to provide a context for the treatment of conscience in the plays in question, it may be interesting to look at Shakespeare's use of the word in other plays. This also highlights a problem, because conscience is not 'but a word', to borrow a phrase from *Richard III*, 5.3.309-10, but is a theme also where the word itself is not employed. In *Macbeth*, for instance, the word is never used. By focusing on occurrences of the word itself, one runs the risk of excluding the treatments of the subject where other words are used to describe the phenomenon. This objection is worth bearing in mind, but to get an idea of how the word 'conscience' is employed by Shakespeare, and see how it can carry different meanings, the following analysis is useful. I will also look at passages in Shakespeare where the word itself is not used, but some other word describes the same phenomenon, such as for instance 'guilt' or 'burden'. While looking at the occurrences of 'conscience' in Shakespeare, I will go through some of the meanings of the word listed in the *OED*, most of which are obsolete. The *OED* entries point to a fact which is important to remember when looking at Shakespeare's texts, namely that today we mostly use the word to denote a sense of right and wrong. To us the word has distinctly ethical connotations, and has not retained much of its other meaning 'political conviction' (not a separate entry in the *OED*). This meaning is still retained in the

terms ‘conscientious objector’ and ‘prisoner of conscience’, and may be a product of the decades leading up to the Civil War, when religion became increasingly politicized. Religious dissenters would hold the law or the dominant doctrine to be against their conscience, which made them unable to live in accordance with the law. Conscience ceased to be confined to the domain of faith and other spiritual matters; cases of conscience arose also in questions concerning political and religious allegiance:

Here the essential issue was whether human laws were binding on the conscience. That, said Jeremy Taylor, was ‘the greatest case of conscience in this whole matter’: was it a matter of conscience as well as prudence to conform to the law of the land? In his view, and that of many of his fellow casuists, it unquestionably was. The commands of a lawful authority in indifferent matters were to be obeyed. Only if those commands were directly against the law of God could they be ignored; and even then active resistance was unlawful. But what was a lawful authority and what were matters indifferent? And did not the very law of nature concede an ultimate right of self-defence? It was by asking such questions that one could deny the duty of Puritans or Dissenters to conform to the worship of the Anglican Church, justify Parliamentary resistance to Charles I, and require citizens to pledge their support to the Commonwealth government.¹⁷

The current meaning of ‘conscience’ is expressed in the *OED* as ‘Consciousness of right and wrong; moral sense’, and further, ‘The internal acknowledgement or recognition of the moral quality of one’s motives and actions’.¹⁸ This is the meaning which is of interest in the analysis of *Richard III* and *Macbeth*. I will leave this for now, and look at some of the other meanings of conscience. Conscience might also mean ‘inward knowledge or consciousness’, ‘inmost thought’ and ‘understanding’, all of which are obsolete today.¹⁹

1.1. Conscience as Inward Knowledge, Deliberation or Opinion

The meaning ‘inward knowledge’ is related to the modern application, but was applicable to any knowledge, not just moral knowledge. The predecessor of ‘conscience’ was the Middle English ‘inwit’, which has a more obvious relationship to the meaning ‘inward knowledge’: inner wit. ‘Inwit’ could mean both conscience in the modern sense and ‘reason, intellect,

¹⁷ Keith Thomas, ‘Cases of Conscience in Seventeenth-Century England’, in *Public Duty and Private Conscience in Seventeenth-Century England*, ed. by John Morrill and others (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993), pp. 29-56 (p. 42-3).

¹⁸ *OED*, ‘conscience’ II; 4.a.

¹⁹ *OED*, ‘conscience’ 1.a., 2.a. and 3.

understanding; wisdom'.²⁰ 'Conscience' sometimes signifies a more general inward knowledge in Shakespeare. In *Twelfth Night*, Sebastian assures Antonio that 'were my worth as is my conscience firm,/ You should find better dealing' (3.3.17-8). G. Blakemore Evans reads the word as 'awareness (of my indebtedness)'.²¹ Still, here it encompasses no more than moral knowledge: his moral sense is firm, and urges him to pay Antonio back. The concept of conscience takes different forms with regards to the abilities of the mind, such as understanding, judgment and opinion. These terms are related and often overlap in meaning, but are also distinguished from each other. Timon in *Timon of Athens* says to Flavius: 'Canst thou the conscience lack/ To think I shall lack friends?' (2.2.175-6). Evans glosses the word as 'good sense, judgment', and one might add 'understanding'.²² What Timon seems to mean is 'if you think I shall be friendless, your mental capacity is insufficient'. It is possible to interpret 'conscience' in its modern meaning: 'it is a heartless thing to think I shall be friendless, therefore you lack conscience when you suggest that'. However, this seems unlikely in the context of the phrase, because Timon does not show resentment towards Flavius. Conscience meaning 'judgment', the ability to consider a matter and arrive at a conclusion, is suggested by two uses in the *Henry VI* plays. Salisbury defends the Duke of York's right to the crown in *2 Henry VI*:

My lord, I have considered with myself
The title of this most renowned duke,
And in my conscience do repute his Grace
The rightful heir to England's royal seat. (5.1.175-8)

Here, the meaning seems to be that he has deliberated the matter in his mind ('considered with myself'), and arrived at a conclusion. It is possible to interpret Salisbury's decision as based on his moral conscience, but the preceding lines strengthen the first interpretation. A similar case is found in *3 Henry VI*, where Exeter argues the same to King Henry: 'My conscience tells me he is lawful king' (1.1.150). Arguably, Exeter could speak to York with reference to

²⁰ *OED*, 'inwit' 1 and 2.

²¹ G. Blakemore Evans, note to *Twelfth Night*, 3.3.17.

²² G. Blakemore Evans, note to *Timon of Athens*, 2.2.175.

Henry, meaning his moral sense tells him that Henry is the lawful king. However, the context suggests that he speaks to the king, and that his judgment tells him York is the lawful king, as he considers this a few lines earlier: ‘he [Richard II] could not so resign his crown/ But that the next heir should succeed and reign’ (145-6). In Hermione’s defence speech in *The Winter’s Tale*, the meaning is less equivocal:

I appeal
To your own conscience, sir, before Polixenes
Came to your court, how I was in your grace,
How merited to be so; (3.2.45-8)

Hermione’s appeal is to Leontes’ judgment, as she does not appeal to his sense of morality, but goes on to present circumstances and facts for his consideration. Conscience may also mean ‘knowledge’, as she is pointing to the circumstances of which Leontes already knows: that she was in his favour before Polixenes arrived.

Conscience may also mean ‘opinion’, a term which is less dependent on previous deliberation than ‘judgment’, but these two senses of the word are essentially alike. ‘Opinion’ is the meaning of the first instance of ‘conscience’ in Launcelot Gobbo’s quip ‘and in my conscience, my conscience is but a kind of hard conscience’ (*The Merchant of Venice*, 2.2.28-9).²³ Henry V uses the word in the sense of opinion when he says ‘By my troth, I will speak my conscience of the King: I think he would not wish himself any where but where he is’ (4.1.118-9). There is a similar use of the word in *The Winter’s Tale*, where a Mariner says to Antigonus: ‘In my conscience,/ The heavens with that we have in hand are angry’ (3.3.4-5). Evans glosses this occurrence of conscience as ‘opinion’.²⁴ This use of the word approaches a figure of speech or mannerism, ‘in my/your conscience’ or ‘my conscience’, which does not necessarily denote a result of deliberation, as Fluellen uses the phrase seven times in *Henry V*, the first time in 3.6.13.

²³ In Launcelot’s opinion, his conscience ‘is but a kind of hard conscience, to offer to counsel me to stay with the Jew’. It is likely that these three occurrences of conscience have different meanings, as it would make the quip more effective. If this is the case, ‘hard conscience’ may mean ‘severe judge’, although this meaning is not listed in the *OED*.

²⁴ G. Blakemore Evans, note to *The Winter’s Tale*, 3.3.4.

Another example shows how ‘conscience’ can signify either of several meanings, or several of them, and how it may be difficult to interpret the exact meaning of the word. King Henry says to Gloucester in 2 *Henry VI*:

My Lord of Gloucester, ’tis my special hope
That you will clear yourself from all suspense.
My conscience tells me you are innocent. (3.1.139-41)

What does Henry mean? Is conscience his moral sense, telling him that Gloucester is innocent? If so, can conscience bear witness against anyone but its owner? Could his conscience mean ‘his conviction’, relating it to Henry’s faith? Or rather, is it his judgment, which links conscience to his intellect? Or is this a use of the word closer to its etymological roots, meaning Henry’s insight into divine knowledge due to his status as the Lord’s anointed king? An argument may be made for any of these interpretations, and this demonstrates the difficulty of interpreting a word with several related meanings.

In addition to these rather specific meanings of the word there are more generalized uses, such as in *Othello*, where Iago says of Venetian wives that

they do let God see the pranks
They dare not show their husbands; their best conscience
Is not to leave’t undone, but keep’t unknown. (3.3.202-4)

Norman Sanders interprets the phrase ‘their best conscience’ as ‘their highest idea of morality’, in other words a more general moral or ethic.²⁵ A much debated line in *Hamlet* has led critics to read conscience as ‘introspection’ or a sort of self-analysis:²⁶ ‘Thus conscience does make cowards of us all’ (3.1.82). This is a generalizing interpretation of conscience, and a bold one, since there are no other examples of this use in Shakespeare. In my view, there is little doubt that Hamlet speaks of conscience in a moral sense: conscience is ‘the dread of something after death’ (77), and ultimately a faculty of the soul which makes men fear God. Conscience is not ‘the pale cast of thought’ (84), because that would equate it with

²⁵ Norman Sanders, footnote to 3.3.205 in *Othello* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 122.

²⁶ Ghurye, *Shakespeare on Conscience*, p. 38, and Marjorie Garber, *Dream in Shakespeare: From Metaphor to Metamorphosis* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), p. 89.

melancholy. Rather, conscience induces thoughts which make the subject shift in aspect from ‘the native hue of resolution’ (83) to ‘the pale cast of thought’. Conscience is not so much opposed to action, as it is opposed to determination and decision. *Hamlet* presents us with a similar idea of conscience to that introduced in *King John*, where Salisbury remarks:

The color of the King doth come and go
Between his purpose and his conscience,
Like heralds ’twixt two dreadful battles set:
His passion is so ripe, it needs must break. (4.2.76-9)

The ‘purpose’ of King John is to kill Arthur, but his conscience condemns the act. Hamlet is either contemplating suicide or regicide, but the ‘dread of something after death’ obstructs his purpose, ‘puzzles the will’ (*Hamlet*, 3.1.79). Conscience, then, is not a thought process or the conflict of choice itself, but one of the two poles between which thought vacillates. The other pole is ‘will’ in *Hamlet*, ‘purpose’ in *King John* (above) and *Macbeth*:²⁷

Stop up th’ access and passage to remorse,
That no compunctious visitings of nature
Shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between
Th’ effect and it! (1.5.44-47)

1.2 Transferred Applications of the Word

The word ‘conscience’ has also carried transferred meanings. In the seventeenth century, it was used to denote ‘a larger jug that some men call A bellarmine, but we a conscience’.²⁸ In the nineteenth century, it could mean ‘a plate resting against the drill-head and enabling the pressure of the breast or hand to be brought upon the drill’, in other words a sort of breastplate.²⁹ This is not to say that any of these meanings are invoked by Shakespeare, but it points to applications of the term which were also current in Shakespeare’s time. Conscience as a breastplate, for instance, is described by the king in *2 Henry VI*:

What stronger breastplate than a heart untainted!
Thrice is he arm’d that hath his quarrel just;
And he but naked, though lock’d up in steel,
Whose conscience with injustice is corrupted. (3.2.232-5)

²⁷ This is discussed further in chapter 3 in relation to *Macbeth*.

²⁸ *OED*, ‘conscience’ 14, citing William Cartwright, *The Ordinary* [c. 1634].

²⁹ *OED*, ‘conscience’ 15, citing Cameron Knight, *The Mechanician and Constructor for Engineers* (1869).

A clean conscience is here thought of as an armour, a protective covering, that will ensure success in battle, similar to the image invoked by Oxford in *Richard III*: ‘Every man’s conscience is a thousand men,/ To fight against this guilty homicide’ (5.2.17-8). Whereas the latter passage may only indicate that a clean conscience makes the soldier braver, Henry’s statement suggests a belief in God’s providence for the pure of heart. He believes God will protect the righteous and punish the wicked, a belief which is undermined by the outcome of the play. There is little in the play to suggest that God intervenes on behalf of the saintly. Henry’s creed seems to be inspired by the following passage from Ephesians about the armour of God and the fight against the powers of darkness:

Put on the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to stand against the assaults of the deuil.
 For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, *and* against the worldlie gouernours, *the princes* of the darkenes of this worlde, against spiritual wickednesses, *which are* in the hie places.
 For this cause take vnto you the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to resist in the euil daye, & hauing finished all things, stand fast.
 Stand therefore, and your loines girde about with veritie, & hauing on the brest plate of righteousness,
 And your fete shod with the preparation of the Gospel of peace.
 Aboue all, take the shield of faith, wherewith ye may quench all the fyrie dartes of the wicked,
 And take the helmet of saluation, and the sworde of ye Spirit, which is the worde of God.³⁰

A similar reference to the armour of God is found in the apocryphal *The Wisdome of Salomon*:

He shal put on righteousness for a brestplate, and take true iudgement in stead of an helmet.
 He wil take holines for an inuincible shield.³¹

Henry’s little speech mentions the breastplate, and is said in a proverbial tone which clears his statement of any doubt: he means what he says and believes it firmly. The *Geneva Bible* has a marginal note to ‘the brest plate of righteousness’, equating ‘righteousnes’ with ‘Innocencie’. Henry appears to interpret ‘righteousnes’ in the same way, comparing the breastplate to ‘a heart untainted’. The Bastard in *King John* also makes the connection between armour and conscience in his description of how King Philip used to be: ‘France, whose armor conscience

³⁰ *Geneva Bible*, Ephesians 6. 11-17.

³¹ *Geneva Bible*, *The Wisdome of Salomon*, 5. 18-9. Both citations are mentioned in Ronald Knowles’ notes to 3.2.232 in the Arden edition. *King Henry VI, Part Two*, ed. by Ronald Knowles (Walton-on-Thames: The Arden Shakespeare, 1999).

buckled on,/ Whom zeal and charity brought to the field/ As God's own soldier [...]' As God's soldier, King Philip has his armour put on by 'conscience', which is slightly different from Henry's equation of the two. Still, the connection is established between the king's conscience and defence. Possibly, a similar comparison is made in *Cymbeline*, where Cymbeline says of the brave Posthumus, who has fought in disguise:

Woe is my heart
That the poor soldier that so richly fought,
Whose rags sham'd gilded arms, whose naked breast
Stepp'd before targes of proof, cannot be found. (5.5.2-5)

Posthumus' naked breast has been a better defence than 'gilded arms' and 'targes of proof', and his virtue may suggest he is armoured in a similar manner as King Philip and Henry VI: his good conscience is his armour. Also, his rags have 'sham'd gilded arms', an image which draws attention to the contrast between the bloodstained soldiers and the innocent Posthumus. The proximity of 'sham'd' to 'gilded' makes this a likely pun on gild/guilt, whereby one might say that the 'gilded arms' (armour decorated with gold) of the soldiers are red with the blood of their enemies ('gilded', *OED*), and thus burdened with guilt.³²

These passages draw attention to the opposition between a clean and a tainted conscience. A clean conscience, or a pure heart, is a weapon on the side of the righteous in the fight against evil. A tainted conscience, however, becomes a weapon *against* the wicked, as is the case in *Richard III* and *Macbeth*. Conscience is described as a bad spirit in *Troilus and Cressida*, where Troilus threatens Achilles (who is not present):

No space of earth shall sunder our two hates.
I'll haunt thee like a wicked conscience still,
That mouldeth goblins swift as frenzy's thoughts. (5.10.27-9)

Here, a 'wicked conscience' can generate demons in the mind, as can the thoughts of a madman. Figuratively, Troilus will become Achilles' guilty conscience, haunting him for the cowardly murder of Hector.

³² The puns involving gild/guilt are discussed in further detail in the following pages.

The second transferred meaning of conscience as a 'larger jug' points to an understanding of conscience as a sort of container. The implication was that the more one's conscience could 'room', the more corrupted it was. Philip Stubbes writes that 'The lawiers have such chauerell consciences', and Jeremy Taylor writes of 'A cheuerell conscienced Vsurer'.³³ The literal meaning was that their conscience was made out of kid leather and therefore flexible, and the phrase, judging from the numerous citations, seems to have acquired proverbial status in the seventeenth century.³⁴ Shakespeare uses the phrase in *Henry VIII*, where the Old Lady tries to convince Anne Bullen to sacrifice her chastity in order to become queen:

You, that have so fair parts of woman on you,
Have, too, a woman's heart, which ever yet
Affected eminence, wealth, sovereignty;
Which, to say sooth, are blessings; and which gifts
(saving your mincing) the capacity
Of your soft cheveril conscience would receive
If you might please to stretch it. (2.3.27-33)

Henry V, in his threat to the governor of Harfleur, uses a similar image when he declares that 'the flesh'd soldier, rough and hard of heart,/ In liberty of bloody hand, shall range,/ With conscience wide as hell' (*Henry V*, 3.3.11-13). The image is of a flexible conscience, tolerant of all sins which condemn the soul to hell.

Anne Bullen's 'soft cheveril conscience' may also be interpreted as a reference to her womb or her genitalia, which will receive the gifts of sovereignty, either a child or the king's penis.³⁵ The first interpretation seems reasonable, as the womb is 'cheveril', very flexible. It is also supported by the word 'blessings', as children are often referred to as a blessing from God. However, 'conscience' may also signify the vagina, suggesting that the king is well-endowed, as Anne would have to 'stretch' her 'conscience' in order to accommodate his

³³ *OED* 'cheverel' 2.b. cites Philip Stubbes, *The Anatomy of Abuses* (1583), and 'cheverel' 3. cites Jeremy Taylor, *Works* (1630).

³⁴ See also Tilley, C 608.

³⁵ Gordon McMullan treats the topic of Anne's 'soft cheveril conscience' in his introduction to *King Henry VIII: (All Is True)*, ed. by Gordon McMullan (London: The Arden Shakespeare, 2000), pp. 80-1. He makes further reference to Judith H. Anderson, *Biographical Truth: The Representation of Historical Persons in Tudor-Stuart Writing* (New Haven, Conn.: 1984), pp. 128-9.

organ. The Old Lady's phrase 'saving your mincing' is a reference to what she sees as Anne's priggishness,³⁶ but the above reading also yields a distressing image of castration, as Anne's 'mincing', in the sense of chopping meat, is what stops her from receiving the king's gifts.

There may be several references to conscience as female genitalia or the womb in *King Henry VIII*. In 2.4, Henry explains how his doubts about the legitimacy of his marriage to Katherine began to stir within him. The process is described in terms associating it with pregnancy. 'Conscience' carries its common meaning in 'My conscience first receiv'd a tenderness,/ Scruple, and prick, on certain speeches utter'd/ By th' Bishop of Bayonne' (2.4.171-3), signifying that Henry's moral sense was first awakened by the Bishop. 'Conscience' may also mean vagina, as tenderness may suggest intimate touch, scruple can be 'a very small part' (i.e. the Bishop's genitals), and prick may denote the penis.³⁷ Furthermore, the respite in the matter requested by the Bishop

shook
The bosom of my conscience, enter'd me,
Yea, with a spitting power, and made to tremble
The region of my breast, which forc'd such way,
That many maz'd considerings did throng
And press'd in with this caution. (2.4.182-7)

The king experiences the delay in the proceedings as an assault on his conscience, making it shake and tremble. The meaning seems to be that the delay causes the king to investigate his moral feelings, but the language invokes images of sexual assault: the respite 'enters' him 'with a spitting power', and may even lead to orgasm: 'and made to tremble/ The region of my breast'. 'Spitting' may refer to the transfixing power of the delay,³⁸ but also allows for two bawdy interpretations: penetrating/pinning down and ejaculating.³⁹ Figuratively, this reading presents the development of the king's conscience as a pregnancy originating in a

³⁶ Gordon McMullan glosses it as 'despite your pretend delicacy'. Note to 2.3.31 in *King Henry VIII: (All Is True)*.

³⁷ *OED*, 'scruple' *n.*, 6 and 'prick' *n.*, 17. a.

³⁸ G. Blakemore Evans, note to *King Henry VIII*, 2.4.184.

³⁹ A phrase which may remind the reader, perhaps even contemporary audiences, of Marlowe's *Edward II* (c. 1592), in which the king is penetrated rectally with a red-hot spit.

violent conception. ‘Conception’ is a word associated with the origin of thoughts as well as a foetus, and it links the thought process to pregnancy. Henry describes his ‘pregnancy’ further in his speech:

I weigh'd the danger which my realm stood in
By this my issue's fail, and that gave to me
Many a groaning throe. Thus hulling
In the wild sea of my conscience, I did steer
Toward this remedy [...]
 that's to say,
I meant to rectify my conscience – which
I then did feel full sick, and yet not well –
By all the fathers of the land
And doctors learn'd. [...]
 You remember
How under my oppression I did reek
When I first mov'd you. (2.4.198-210)

‘Many a groaning throe’ alludes to labour pains, ‘I then did feel full sick’ to morning sickness, and ‘How under my oppression I did reek’ to the act of giving birth. He consults not only priests, but also ‘doctors learn’d’, enhancing the notion that his condition is physical as well as mental. The reason for his uneasiness is the thought of not having an heir, and the motif of pregnancy is thus a fitting parallel to his deliberations.⁴⁰

That conscience may allude to female genitalia is also suggested in *The Rape of Lucrece*, where Tarquin holds ‘disputation/ ‘Tween frozen conscience and hot burning will’ (246-7). The primary meaning is that he is drawn between his moral sense and his desire, but ‘will’ may also allude to his penis.⁴¹ His ‘disputation’, his deliberation, is what separates his inflamed penis from Lucrece’s chaste, and thus ‘frozen’, cold, vagina. The antithesis between the burning and the frozen genitalia expresses Lucrece’s rejection of his advances. The reason why ‘conscience’ is linked to female genitalia remains unclear, but the connection may be made on account of the similarity in characteristics. A conscience ‘wide as hell’, as in *Henry V*, is a licentious conscience, capable of tolerating more sin. Similarly, a ‘wide’ vagina is

⁴⁰ Gordon McMullan writes of King Henry that ‘He even adopts a curious maternal stance as his need for an heir resolves itself into a kind of phantom pregnancy, the “danger” (194) that gives him “[m]any a groaning throe” (196)’. Introduction to *King Henry VIII: (All Is True)*, p. 83.

⁴¹ *OED*, 'willy, willie', 2.

wanton and indiscriminate. The image adds to the notion of conscience as a container or receptacle of actions and thoughts.

Similar to the idea of a flexible conscience is the one suggested by Launcelot Gobbo in *The Merchant of Venice*, who can manipulate his conscience to serve his intentions:

Certainly my conscience will serve me to run away from this Jew my master. [...] Certainly the Jew is the very devil incarnation, and in my conscience, my conscience is but a hard conscience, to offer to counsel me to stay with the Jew. The fiend gives the more friendly counsel: I will run, fiend; my heels are at your commandment, I will run. (2.2.1-2; 27-32)

Launcelot sees his conscience as ‘a kind of hard conscience’, that is, a severe and unfriendly conscience, which gives him bad counsel. The fiend at his elbow (2.2.2-3) ‘gives the more friendly counsel’, and his conscience urges him to stay with the ‘devil incarnate’, which by inference must be ungodly counsel. Launcelot thus inverts the relationship between the good and the bad angel on his shoulder.⁴² He manipulates his conscience to counsel like a fiend through his flawed logic, and may therefore say that his ‘conscience will serve me to run away from this Jew my master’.

Launcelot’s speech introduces the idea that a man’s conscience may be flawed, and this notion of a flawed or disabled conscience is also an issue in *1 Henry IV*:

Prince. Go hide thee behind the arras, the rest walk up above. Now, my masters, for a true face and good conscience.
Falstaff. Both which I have had, but their date is out, and therefore I’ll hide me.
(2.4.500-4)

Falstaff says he used to have a good conscience, but it is out of date, indicating that it has stopped functioning. As with Launcelot, Falstaff’s conscience is not working as it should, but their idea of conscience is different. It appears that for Launcelot, conscience is a spiritual external presence like the fiend, both working to influence his actions. In Falstaff’s description, conscience seems to be something innate in his nature, an internal faculty he may possess. This discrepancy in the conception of conscience is similar to the differing ideas of conscience in *Richard III* and *Macbeth*, as will be shown in chapter 3.

⁴² On the idea of conscience as the ‘better angel’, see the discussion on the colloquy between the two murderers in *Richard III* in chapter 3.

1.3. Puns on Guilt and Gilt

Conscience in Shakespeare's plays is expressed through a range of other words, such as 'burden', 'guilty dread', 'Don Worm', and 'guilt'. This last word has been the source of an often used pun in Shakespeare in 'guilt' and 'gilt'. 'Guilt' may be used as a noun or a verb, although the verb form is not recorded after 1553, but may have been retained as an archaic form for poetic purposes.⁴³ 'Gilt' can mean reward, riches, or apparent value, and is often linked to guilt with connotations to punishment as payment. For instance, in *Richard II*, Henry IV says to Exton, Richard's murderer:

Exton, I thank thee not, for thou hast wrought
A deed of slander with thy fatal hand
Upon my head and all this famous land
[...]
They love not poison that do poison need,
Nor do I thee. Though I did wish him dead,
I hate the murderer, love him murdered.
The guilt of conscience take thou for thy labor,
But neither my good word nor princely favor. (5.6.34-6; 38-42)

Exton's 'reward' appears to be banishment ('With Cain go wander thorough shades of night,/ And never show thy head by day nor light' (5.6.43-4)), and all he receives from Henry is 'The guilt of conscience'. It can also be read as the 'gilt of conscience', where 'gilt' may signify two things: payment (in gold) and seeming worth.⁴⁴ A gilded object is a base material with a thin layer of gold, making it seem more valuable than it is. This association of guilt with money may be influenced by a similar motif in the New Testament, where Judas receives thirty pieces of silver to betray Jesus and, repenting, throws the money into the Temple.⁴⁵ Symbolically, the money represents the burden of guilt which Judas attempts to cast off. In *Richard II*, however, it is not Exton who attempts to clear himself of guilt, but Henry, who vows to 'make a voyage to the Holy Land/ To wash this blood off from my guilty hand'

⁴³ OED, 'guilt' v.

⁴⁴ OED, 'gilt' n.¹ 3.a. and 2.

⁴⁵ Geneva Bible, Matthew 27. 3-5.

(5.6.49-50). While Henry admits responsibility, he distances himself from the act: 'Though I did wish him dead,/ I hate the murtherer, love him murdered'.⁴⁶

There are many instances in Shakespeare's plays of the guilt/gilt pun, and also one in Sonnet 20:

A woman's face with Nature's own hand painted
Hast thou, the master mistress of my passion;
A woman's gentle heart but not acquainted
With shifting change as is false women's fashion;
An eye more bright than theirs, less false in rolling,
Gilding the object whereupon it gazeth;
A man in hue all hues in his controlling,
Which steals men's eyes and women's souls amazeth. (1-8)

As it turns out, the poem is about a man whose eye has the ability to gild 'the object whereupon it gazeth' (6). The immediate meaning is clear: the person looked upon feels more valuable, and is thus 'gilded'. 'Gilding' may also mean to smear with blood, as gold and red are often used interchangeably.⁴⁷ In this sonnet, to gild may mean to redden, causing the object of the youth's gaze to blush. After all, this is a man who has 'all hues in his controlling' (7), and can cause blushing in those around him. Finally, it may also suggest a sense of shame in the speaker, because of his attraction to the male youth. He is 'guilted' by the youth's look because his sexuality is aroused, and blushes for shame. The most explicit pun on guilt/gild is found in the prologue to the second act of *Henry V*: 'three corrupted men [...] Have for the gilt of France (O guilt indeed!)/ Confirm'd conspiracy with fearful France' (22; 26-7). Another is found in 2 *Henry IV*, where the king says to Hal: 'England shall double gild his treble guilt' (4.5.128). In *King John*, the association between gold, blood and guilt is again established: 'Their armours, that march'd hence so silver-bright,/ Hither return all gilt with Frenchmen's blood'. These lines describe an increase in value (silver is exchanged for gold) as well as a debasing of the soldier, carrying home the burden of 'guilt' for the death of his enemy,

⁴⁶ 'The precedents for this kind of disavowal go back to Henry II over the murder of Thomas a Becket [sic], and to Elizabeth herself, who disowned Secretary Davison's order to execute Mary Queen of Scots'. Andrew Gurr, footnote to 5.6.37-40 in *Richard II*, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 183.

⁴⁷ *OED*, 'gild', v.¹ 1.d. I shall return to the various uses of golden/red in the treatment of Macbeth in Chapter 3.

symbolized by the blood. *Hamlet* also ties together gold, blood and guilt in the words of the penitent Claudius: 'In the corrupted currents of this world/ Offence's gilded hand may shove by justice' (3.3.57-8). G. Blakemore Evans reads 'gilded' as 'bribing', but the offender's hand is also figuratively bloodied, and bears the guilt of the crime by synecdoche.⁴⁸ There is possibly a pun made by Albany in *King Lear*: 'Edmund, I arrest thee/ On capital treason; and, in thine attaint,/ This gilded serpent' (5.3.82-4). It is not an explicit pun, but made stronger by the word 'attaint', which may be associated with a stain of sin. Because of Goneril's intimacy with Edmund, his sin has 'rubbed off' on her, and she is 'guilted' as well as 'gilded'. Jessica in *The Merchant of Venice* brings guilt on herself by stealing from her father: 'I will make fast the doors, and gild myself/ With some moe ducats, and be with you straight' (2.6.49). In *The Tempest*, Alonso observes the inebriated servants Stephano and Trinculo and asks: 'Where should they/ Find this grand liquor that hath gilded 'em?' (5.1.279-80), in other words reddened their faces. Evans notes that 'Possibly *grand liquor* contains an alchemical allusion to the long-sought elixir that could transform base substances to gold', known as *aurum potabile*, drinkable gold, and presumably he attributes the ability to make such an elixir to Prospero's magic.⁴⁹ There is no obvious allusion to guilt here, but the connection between gold and blood is established. The link between 'guilt' and 'gild' is established in *A Lover's Complaint*, where the maid says of her former suitor that she 'saw how deceits were gilded in his smiling' (172). The primary meaning is that the man's deceit is covered over, or made less offensive, by his smile. But his 'smiling' is also part of his deceit: his deceit is in a sense activated by his smile, and deception is made 'guilty' by the smile's effect.

⁴⁸ G. Blakemore Evans, note to *Hamlet*, 3.3.58 in *The Riverside Shakespeare*.

⁴⁹ Evans, note to *The Tempest*, 5.1.280.

1.4 Other Metaphors and Images

Another image connected to conscience is the worm. In *Richard III*, Margaret curses Richard, and bids that ‘the worm of conscience’ gnaws his soul forever (1.3.221). It is an image related to decay and internal suffering, as it is shown in chapter 3. In *Hamlet*, the image of the worm is also connected to conscience. Hamlet mentions the worm in one of his ‘madman’ exchanges with Claudius:

King. Now, Hamlet, where’s Polonius?
Ham. At supper.
King. At supper? where?
Ham. Not where he eats, but where ’a is eaten; a certain convocation of politic worms are e’en at him. Your worm is your only emperor for diet: we fat all creatures else to fat us, and we fat ourselves for maggots; your fat king and your lean beggar is but variable service, two dishes, but to one table – that’s the end.
King. Alas, alas!
Ham. A man may fish with the worm that hath eat of a king, and eat of the fish that hath fed of that worm.
King. What dost thou mean by this?
Ham. Nothing but to show you how a king may go a progress through the guts of a beggar.
(4.3.16-31)

I would argue, and most critics agree, that Hamlet is not ranting in this speech, but rather chooses his words carefully. The image he presents is that all men who die must be eaten by worms. In *Richard III*, the idea that all men are gnawed within by conscience is proposed. The ‘worm’ in Hamlet’s parable may also allude to conscience: all men, kings and beggars, are affected by the same conscience, and are equal in the afterlife. When Hamlet says that ‘A man may fish with the worm that hath eat of a king’, he may also allude to his own fishing for Claudius’ conscience, using the mousetrap play as bait: ‘the play’s the thing/ Wherein I’ll catch the conscience of the King’ (2.2.604-5). As the fish takes the worm, the king has taken Hamlet’s bait. Claudius may suspect the hidden meaning of Hamlet’s words, asking ‘What dost thou mean by this?’, but Hamlet gives him a more transparent explanation of the parable. The worm image is complicated by the fact that Claudius is likened to a serpent by the Ghost: ‘The serpent that did sting thy father’s life/ Now wears his crown’ (1.5.39-40). So are Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, whom Hamlet will trust as ‘adders fang’d’ (3.4.203). Serpents

and adders are elsewhere referred to as worms, for instance in *Antony and Cleopatra*, where a poisonous snake is referred to as ‘the pretty worm of Nilus’ (5.2.243). Apart from Polonius, his schoolfellows and the king are the people killed by Hamlet, and the ones whose death should affect his conscience. By comparing them to ‘worms’, they become Hamlet’s own ‘worm of conscience’, although the phrase is not used in the play.

I will briefly mention two ambiguous passages in *King John* which are probably not references to conscience, but may still provide relevant insight into other aspects of the soul which are connected to conscience. In a conversation between John and the French king, there is a reference to ‘that supernal judge’:

K. John. From whom hast thou this great commission, France,
To draw my answer from thy articles?
K. Phi. From that supernal judge that stirs good thoughts
In any breast of strong authority,
To look into the blots and stains of right.
That judge hath made me guardian to this boy,
Under whose warrant I impeach thy wrong,
And by whose help I mean to chastise it. (2.1.110-7)

The ‘supernal judge that stirs good thoughts’ may be conscience, as conscience has also ‘buckled on’ the French king’s armour (2.1.564), and is a faculty that enables a man to ‘look into the blots and stains of right’. It is, however, more likely a reference to God, the king’s supreme authority. It is the reason for this ambiguity which is of interest here: conscience is elsewhere referred to as a ‘deity in my bosom’ (*The Tempest*, 2.1.275).⁵⁰ The idea of conscience as ‘a little god within’ emphasizes its authority and control over human actions, and may be the cause of a paradox in relation to man’s free will. The promotion of conscience to the status of ‘deity’ is a way of legitimizing a course of action, paradoxically putting actions beyond the realm of moral choice, and relieving, in this case King Philip, of ultimate responsibility for his actions. Conscience is, in this case, external pressure rather than internal conviction.

⁵⁰ *OED*, ‘conscience’ 4. a: ‘Opinions as to the nature, function, and authority of conscience are widely divergent, varying from the conception of the mere exercise of the ordinary judgement on moral questions, to that of an infallible guide of conduct, *a sort of deity within us*.’ (my emphasis)

Another passage in *King John* draws a parallel to Clarence's executioners in *Richard*

III, when Hubert says in an aside with Arthur:

Hub. [Aside] If I talk to him, with his innocent prate
He will awake my mercy, which lies dead;
Therefore I will be sudden, and dispatch.
Arth. Are you sick, Hubert? You look pale to-day.
[...]
Hub. [Aside] His words do take possession of my bosom.
(4.1.25-8; 32)

Here, Hubert refers to his conscience, being awakened by Arthur's 'innocent prate'. The ear is presented as a passageway to mercy, and one can awaken the 'dead' conscience through speaking. The sense of hearing is clearly related to conscience, as is sight, as the Protestant theologian William Perkins asserts: 'the Conscience afflicted, hath a true and certain cause, whereby it is troubled, namely, the sight of sinne'.⁵¹ The sense of sight as a 'passage to remorse', in Lady Macbeth's words (*Macbeth*, 1.5.44), is an important element in *Macbeth*, and in *King John*, sight as well as hearing is related to pity and compassion. The notion that Hubert's eyes or his gaze may be a sign of scrupulous deliberation is present in Pembroke's description of him: 'The image of a wicked heinous fault/ Lives in his eye; that close aspect of his/ Doth show the mood of a much troubled breast' (*King John*, 4.2.71-3).

1.5 The Functions of Conscience

Conscience has different qualities and abilities in Shakespeare's plays. *Henry V* stresses the function of cleansing: 'we will hear, note, and believe in heart,/ That what you speak is in your conscience wash'd/ As pure as sin with baptism' (1.2.30-2). Conscience may clean one's words and remove any falsehood from speech. But a conscience must also be cleaned: 'Therefore should every soldier in the wars do as every sick man in his bed, wash every mote out of his conscience; and dying so, death is to him advantage; or not dying, the time was blessedly lost wherein such preparation was gain'd' (4.1.178-82). A clean conscience, then, is

⁵¹ William Perkins, *The Whole Treatise of the Cases of Conscience* (Cambridge: the author, 1606; repr. Amsterdam: Theatrum Orbis Terrarum, 1972), p. 193.

intimately connected to salvation, as it has a similar justifying effect to that of baptism. Conscience is regarded as a holy virtue, as it is something one swears by, as in *3 Henry VI*, where King Lewis asks the ambassador Warwick: ‘tell me, even upon thy conscience,/ Is Edward your true king?’ (3.3.113-4). Its ability to improve a man’s virtue is affirmed in *Julius Caesar*, where a cobbler says of his profession that it is ‘A trade, sir, that I hope I may use with a safe conscience, which is indeed, sir, a mender of bad soles’ (1.1.13-14), making a pun on ‘soles’ and ‘souls’. But conscience may also sleep or be frozen, which hinders its effectiveness. Tarquin’s ‘frozen conscience’ is in the end no match for his ‘hot burning will’ (*The Rape of Lucrece*, 247), and Antonio’s ‘Twenty consciences’ is no hindrance to his evil actions, as ‘candied be they/ And melt ere they molest’ (*The Tempest*, 2.1.278-9).⁵² Melune’s sleeping conscience in *King John* is awakened by his love for Hubert and respect for his ancestor: ‘The love for him, and this respect besides,/ For that my grandsire was an Englishman,/ Awakes my conscience to confess all this’ (5.4.41-3). It also shows conscience as an incitement to confession, as several other passages show, for instance with Claudius in the prayer scene in *Hamlet* (3.3.36-72). Conscience is also an instrument of torture for Iachimo in *Cymbeline*, which leads him to confess his guilt:

Thou’lt torture me to leave unspoken that
Which, to be spoke, would torture thee.
[...]
I am glad to be constrain’d to utter that
Which torments me to conceal. (5.5.139-42)

In a contrary fashion, the terrors of conscience leads Cymbeline’s queen to not only confess her crimes, but die in guilty despair, though unrepentant of her actions. Cornelius reports that she died

With horror, madly dying, like her life,
Which (being cruel to the world) concluded
Most cruel to herself. What she confess’d
I will report [...]
But failing of her end [... she]
Grew shameless desperate; open’d (in despite

⁵² G. Blakemore Evans notes that ‘candied’ means ‘sugared’, but conscience’s inability to interfere is the essential point here (note to *The Tempest*, 2.1.279).

Of heaven and men) her purposes; repented
The evils she hatch'd were not effected; so
Despairing died. (5.5.31-34; 57-61)

The queen dies without remorse, yet her conscience appears to be active, driving her into madness and despair.

1.6 The Location of Conscience

In Renaissance literature, there is an interesting difference from the modern use of the word 'conscience': it is not merely a religious, ethical or philosophical concept, but closely linked to the physical body. Elizabethan and Jacobean theologians were not only concerned with matters of the soul, but were conscious about the interrelationship between body, mind, and soul, and that the suffering of one of these would affect the wellbeing of the others.⁵³ William Perkins writes that 'the distraction of the mind will often breed a distemper in the body, and the distemper of the bodie likewise will sometimes cause distraction of mind'.⁵⁴ Perkins also describes in detail the difference between 'conscience' as an affliction of the soul, and 'melancholy' as an affliction of the mind. He presents a view of man where body and soul are connected by the causes of affliction as well as the effects thereof.

The location of conscience is difficult to pinpoint, as it varies in different texts. It is associated with the soul, the heart and the brain, and the home of conscience varies accordingly. *The Tempest* locates conscience in the 'bosom' (2.1.278), which would be somewhere near the heart, as does *Richard III* (1.4.139) and *Henry V*: 'I and my bosom must debate a while,/ And then I would no other company' (4.1.31-2). It is likely that Henry refers to his conscience, as he proceeds to converse with his soldiers in disguise, and the main topic is every man's responsibility to his own conscience: 'every subject's soul is his own. Therefore should every soldier [...] wash every mote out of his conscience' (4.1.177-80). An

⁵³ Perkins, *The Whole Treatise*, p. 109.

⁵⁴ Perkins, *The Whole Treatise*, pp. 198-9.

interesting point may be made here, as Henry does not debate with himself as he says he will do, but debates with his soldiers. His men function as his conscience in a similar manner as the French enemies, who ‘are our outward consciences/ And preachers to us all’ (4.1.8-9). The implication here is that there are two types of conscience; an inward and an outward conscience. I will argue in chapter three that conscience in *Richard III* is predominantly ‘outward’, whereas it is mainly ‘inward’ in *Macbeth*. A less accurate position is given in *Timon of Athens*, where it is said that ‘policy sits above conscience’ (3.2.86). The primary meaning is that reason or expediency must take precedence over pity, but the phrase may also testify to a contemporary notion of ‘policy’ residing in the head, and ‘conscience’ in the breast. In *Henry VIII*, the king speaks of ‘The bosom of my conscience’ which is shaken, and his trembling ‘region of my breast’ (2.4.185), although this passage, as discussed earlier, links conscience to the womb and the female genitalia. *Titus Andronicus* settles for a location somewhere ‘within’ the body, in the words of Aaron: ‘I know thou art religious,/ And hast a thing within thee called conscience’ (5.1.74-75). So does Iachimo in *Cymbeline*: ‘this will witness outwardly,/ As strongly as the conscience does within’ (2.2.35-6). Prince Henry in *King John* refers to a perhaps less common assumption that conscience is in the head, at least if one accepts that conscience resides in the soul: ‘his pure brain/ (Which some suppose the soul’s frail dwelling-house)/ Doth [...] Foretell the ending of mortality’ (5.7.2-5). What may be inferred from these passages is not that conscience is a material substance, but that it is a spiritual reality existing in the body, and is affiliated with the human soul. Conscience thus has a more manifest presence than its modern counterpart, which may be reduced to a ‘concept’ or simply a name for the human ability to distinguish right from wrong.

This modern notion of conscience, however, may have been familiar to Elizabethans as well. Richard of Gloucester rejects the metaphysical reality of conscience, yet acknowledges its effectiveness as a mental construct: ‘Conscience is but a word that cowards

use,/ Devis'd at first to keep the strong in awe' (*Richard III*, 5.3.309-10). He seems to have an intellectual understanding of what conscience is, although he may not have experienced it himself. Aaron similarly seems to understand the effects of conscience, although he appears not to possess it himself: 'I know thou [...] hast a thing within thee called conscience, [...] Therefore I urge thy oath' (*Titus Andronicus*, 5.1.74-5; 78). Iago, in like manner, 'hold it very stuff o' th' conscience/ To do no contriv'd murder' (*Othello*, 1.2.2-3): it is his opinion that this is what conscience demands, although he reveals no personal experience of conscience. If there ever was such a belief that all men have a conscience, it is certainly challenged by these portraits of conscienceless villains.

1.7 Challenging the Relevance of Conscience: *The Tempest*

In chapter three, one of the issues raised is whether conscience is an integral part of human nature or an external agent imposed on man by divine powers. I will address the question here by drawing attention to the theme's treatment in *The Tempest*. In my view, Shakespeare expresses in this play scepticism to conscience as a divine and internal faculty. This scepticism is shown in Prospero's first encounter with Ferdinand. Provoked by Prospero's threats, Ferdinand 'draws, and is charmed from moving' (SD 1.2.467). This is the work of Prospero's magic, yet he orders Ferdinand: 'Put thy sword up, traitor,/ Who maks't a show but dar'st not strike, thy conscience/ Is so possess'd with guilt' (1.2.470-2). In effect, Prospero attributes Ferdinand's inability to raise his sword to his guilty conscience, yet he and the audience know this is not true. Still, Ferdinand makes no further objections to the charge and submits to Prospero's power. This is possibly analogous to the idea that God has power over man's conscience – conscience is bound to one's faith in God. If one does not believe in God, conscience has no power. Could this be Shakespeare's way of presenting a sceptical view of conscience, as something that controls men beyond their control, but has no objective reality? Prospero accuses Ferdinand of not daring to strike him because conscience demands it, but in

reality it is Prospero who controls Ferdinand.⁵⁵ *The Tempest* displays another example of how the human experience of the supernatural or divine control is little else than tricks of magic. In the initial shipwreck scene, Gonzalo appeals to ‘good Fate’ (1.1.30) to deliver the ship from the storm, and the mariners can only cry ‘To prayers, to prayers’ (1.1.51). In the following scene, however, it emerges that Fate or heaven had little to do with the storm, as Prospero reassures Miranda:

The direful spectacle of the wrack, which touch’d
The very virtue of compassion in thee,
I have with such provision in mine art
So safely ordered that there is no soul –
No, not so much perdition as an hair
Betid to any creature in the vessel (1.2.26-31)

The storm is not caused by God, nor is the rescue of the passengers, who are saved through Prospero’s ‘provision’. By attributing accident as well as providence to Prospero, the divine is eliminated from the play. The affliction of conscience is also Prospero’s work, as seen in the encounter with Ferdinand. Antonio appears to be immune to conscience, as he relates how he supplanted his brother Prospero as Duke of Milan:

Seb. But for your conscience?
Ant. Ay, Sir, where lies that? If ’twere a kibe,
’Twould put me to my slipper; But I feel not
This deity in my bosom. Twenty consciences,
That stand ’twixt me and Milan, candied be they,
And melt ere they molest! (2.1.275-80)

He feels not ‘this deity’, conscience, in his bosom, and remains unrepentant throughout the play. Still, Prospero *imposes* the act of repentance on Antonio, Sebastian and Alonso, as it is perceived by Gonzalo:

All three of them are desperate: their great guilt
(Like poison given to work a great time after)
Now gins to bite the spirits. (3.3.104-6)

⁵⁵ There is also a sexual innuendo in this scene where Ferdinand and Prospero fight with phallic symbols for the love of Miranda: ‘Come, from thy ward,/ For I can here disarm thee with this stick,/ And make thy weapon drop’ (1.2.472-4).

Antonio never expresses his own sense of guilt in words, and Gonzalo's description of the 'three men of sin', as Ariel calls them, conveys his impression of the state of magical confusion they are in. Prospero has brought them into this state:

My high charms work,
And these, mine enemies, are all knit up
In their distractions. They now are in my pow'r;
And in these fits I leave them (3.3.88-91)

Not only does Prospero force Antonio into penitence; he also seems to be the cause of Antonio's mischievous thoughts. When Ariel comes to the men's camp, he plays '*solemn music*', making everyone fall asleep except for Antonio and Sebastian. Then, Antonio seems to suddenly come up with a plot to murder Alonso:

What might,
Worthy Sebastian, O, what might – ? No more –
And yet methinks I see it in thy face,
What thou should'st be. Th' occasion speaks thee, and
My strong imagination sees a crown
Dropping upon thy head. (2.1.204-9)

There is no definite evidence that Prospero has told Ariel to give Antonio this idea, but he certainly creates an occasion for it to happen. Ariel has been instructed to do this, as he says that 'Prospero my lord shall know what I have done' (2.1.326), and Prospero thanks him for his service: 'Of my instruction hast thou nothing bated/ In what thou hadst to say' (3.3.85-6). Prospero incites the crime, forces the regret, and even dispenses his forgiveness without being asked: 'They being penitent,/ The sole drift of my purpose extend/ Not a frown further' (5.1.28-30). Antonio makes no reply to Prospero's forgiveness: 'You, brother mine, [...] I do forgive thee,/ Unnatural though thou art' (5.1.75; 78-9). Antonio is of course unable to answer straight away, as he is still under the spell, but he makes no apologies later either, only a crude joke at Caliban's expense (5.1.265-6). In fact, that Antonio is still under the spell only emphasizes his inability to receive forgiveness from Prospero. For Antonio, there is no such thing as free will in his relationship with his brother: he cannot sin, repent, or receive forgiveness by his own accord; all is determined by Prospero.

Conscience, then, seems to have little influence on some of the most significant actions of the characters in *The Tempest*, as these actions are determined by Prospero's magic. What does conscience mean if there is no free will? This constitutes an important question in the later discussion of *Richard III* and *Macbeth*, in which the protagonists seem to be 'determined' to be villains.

Chapter Two: The Theatrical Tradition

Richard III and *Macbeth* have been compared by many critics because of their many similarities, in the early nineteenth century by John Philip Kemble and Thomas Whately, and in the twentieth century by A. P. Rossiter among others.⁵⁶ However, in spite of their similarities, the two plays belong to different phases in the development of English drama. The dating of the plays varies among critics, but *Richard III* may be placed with some degree of certainty between 1592 and 1594, probably written in 1592; and *Macbeth* was written between 1603 and 1606, most likely in 1606.⁵⁷ *Macbeth* falls into a series of great tragedies by Shakespeare which incorporates *Julius Caesar*, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear* and *Antony and Cleopatra*. These plays are characterized by a higher degree of inwardness and psychological realism than previous tragedies. The drama of the early seventeenth century marked a clearer departure from its theatrical origins in medieval drama. *Richard III* was a different kind of tragedy, an identification of genre derived in part from the title in the Folio (*The Tragedy of Richard III*), which adopts the word ‘tragedy’ from the quartos.⁵⁸ It is first and foremost a history play, ending a series of plays about the War of the Roses. It is a tragedy in the medieval sense of the word, which described the rise and fall of a king as exemplified in the *Mirror for Magistrates*. The rejuvenated genre of tragedy that developed in the late 1500s was perhaps closer than the medieval genre to the Greek origins of tragic drama, in which the protagonist fell because of a flaw in his nature. It would be a simplification to state that the development went from a focus on plot to a greater interest in development of character, but such a tendency is evident when comparing *The Jew of Malta* to *The Merchant of Venice*, or *The Spanish Tragedy* to *Hamlet*. The early tragedies’

⁵⁶ Janis Lull, introduction to *Richard III* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 16.

⁵⁷ The dating of *Macbeth*: *The Riverside Shakespeare*, gen. ed. G. Blakemore Evans, p. 1356; Kenneth Muir, introduction to the Arden *Macbeth* (London: Methuen, 1984), pp. xv-xxiv. The dating of *Richard III*: Lull, pp. 4-5; John Jowett, introduction to *The Tragedy of Richard III* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 3-8.

⁵⁸ Lull, *Richard III*, footnote to introduction, p. 1.

reluctance to portray a flawed protagonist who represented Christian values may also have been influenced by the fifteenth century mystery plays, where Church dogma forbade that Christ, as the hero, should have any fault in his nature.⁵⁹ This is not to say that protagonists of early tragedies were not flawed, but these ‘heroes’ were more often representatives of non-Christian values. Hieronimo in *The Spanish Tragedy* emerges as a Senecan avenger, and *Tamburlaine the Great* is a description of a megalomaniac with few sympathetic traits. The early solution to the problem of representing a flawed ‘hero’, in the sense of a morally flawed individual who was nonetheless a representative of good, may have been the invention of the ‘villain hero’. Hieronimo may be an early exception to this, as he evokes some sympathy and is motivated by justice. The plot and the protagonist of *The Spanish Tragedy* resemble those of *Hamlet*, and the two characters have often been compared.⁶⁰ Hieronimo may have been an early model for portrayals of more ambiguous heroes. Barabas in *The Jew of Malta*, however, is less ambiguous as a villain, as is Richard in *Richard III*.

2.1 The Character of the Vice

Richard III develops further a figure from the earlier theatre: the Vice. Bernard Spivack gives a thorough description of the development of this character, or rather the many characters for which the Vice became the generic name. According to Spivack, Richard, together with Aaron in *Titus Andronicus*, Don John in *Much Ado about Nothing* and Iago in *Othello*, represents a relic from the morality plays, a survivor of a tradition that ended around 1590.⁶¹ The morality plays grew out of a tradition of dramatizing homilies, making the sermons of priests and preachers more accessible to the general public. The plays were structured around the *psychomachia*, the conflict between Good and Evil over the human soul. The characters in

⁵⁹ Spencer, *Nature of Man*, p. 52.

⁶⁰ See for instance John Kerrigan, ‘Hieronimo, Hamlet, and Remembrance’, *Essays in Criticism: a Quarterly Journal of Literary Criticism*, 31 (1981), 105-26, and Peter Sacks, ‘Where Words Prevail Not: Grief, Revenge, and Language in Kyd and Shakespeare’, *ELH*, 49 (1982), 576-601.

⁶¹ Spivack, *Allegory of Evil*, p. 59.

the plays were not representations of individual humans, but of virtues and vices within man, such as Love, Conscience, Perseverance, Peace, and Ambidexter, Envy, Misrule and Iniquity.

There are mainly two reasons why the Vice character survived the tradition within which he was born. One reason was his popularity, which was based on the comedy he often generated in the morality plays, the fascination of the grotesqueness of his appearance, and the perverse pleasure he took in dissimulation and intrigue. The theatre public resented the sins he represented, but embraced his roguish charm, and popular demand might have been sufficient to let him continue his stage life beyond the context of the morality play. There was, however, another reason for his persistence on the stage: his function as a disruptive element, disturbing the harmony and order in the lives of the other characters. The Vice character was a useful figure in depicting any kind of dramatic conflict. His effort to create havoc was a representation of the cosmic conflict between good and evil, which all dramatic conflict ultimately reflected. For Elizabethans, the evil they witnessed in a play was

much broader than simply the violation of private love and natural fealty between person and person. In each [play] a great bond of piety, electric with cosmic meaning, is ruptured; the religious foundations of society are shaken and the universe is racked with disorder.⁶²

It would make sense for playwrights to retain a figure like the Vice as a subversive element, an able figure who could challenge the order and hierarchy of scholastic cosmology. Such is the case in *Richard III*, a play in which the natural order ultimately remains intact, but is attacked by Richard, who acts the part of ‘the formal Vice, Iniquity’ (*R III*, 3.1.82). In Spivack’s view, ‘Richard uses the word [Iniquity] to explain that, although he appears something different from the conventional and obvious Vice of the popular stage, he is imitating the method of that role’.⁶³ In the world of *Macbeth*, however, the figure of the Vice has become superfluous, because the structure of the world unravels without its aid. I would argue that part of the reason why the Vice figure finally disappears from the Jacobean stage is

⁶² Spivack, *Allegory of Evil*, p. 49.

⁶³ Spivack, *Allegory of Evil*, p. 394.

that he has become unemployed. He no longer serves a function in the drama, because the divine cosmic order has been disrupted by forces more powerful than those represented by a single character. Spivack describes Iago and his vocation by quoting another of Shakespeare's plays:⁶⁴

Such smiling rogues as these,
Like rats, oft bite the holy cords a-twain
Which are t' intrinse t' unloose. (King Lear, 2.2.73-5)

King Lear belongs to a different era of plays when the holy cords that bind the world together are not so much loosened by villains in the play, though they more or less contribute to this end, but by powers outside of the dramatic context. These powers are referred to as 'gods' and 'elements' in *King Lear*. Lear addresses them, and they reply:

You see me here, you gods, a poor old man,
As full of grief as age, wretched in both.
If it be you that stir these daughters' hearts
Against their father, fool me not so much
To bear it tamely [...]
Storm and tempest.
(2.4.272-276; SD 285)

'The winds and persecutions of the sky' (2.3.12) are not only weather, but interpreted as afflictions from the gods above. Lear is

Contending with the fretful elements;
Bids the winds blow the earth into the sea,
Or swell the curled waters 'bove the main,
That things might change or cease, tears his white hair,
Which the impetuous blasts with eyeless rage
Catch in their fury, and make nothing of,
Strives in his little world of man to outscorn
The to-and-fro-conflicting wind and rain.
(3.1.4-11)

Between *Richard III* and *Macbeth* there seems to be a change in perception of the causes of disaster, and the responsibility shifts from the individual to cosmic powers. The moral responsibility, however, must remain with man.

Tracing the development of the allegorical characters of the morality plays is interesting for two reasons. First, it establishes, as Spivack has shown, the genealogy of

⁶⁴ Spivack, *Allegory of Evil*, p. 47.

Richard as a descendant of the Vice. This is important because it makes it possible to argue that Richard is less human; a part of him is human, another part is demonic. It follows that it is possible he does not have a conscience, which is important to keep in mind in the following discussion. Secondly, Conscience emerges as a character in its own right, for instance in *The World and the Child*,⁶⁵ which may also have an influence on how it is portrayed as an external agent in *Richard III*.

2.2 Richard's Demonic Ancestry: His Father's Son

Richard is a descendant of the medieval stage Vice, but he also inherits demonic traits from his father, whom he resembles more than his brothers, despite Margaret's taunts in *3 Henry VI*, 'But thou art neither like thy sire nor dam,/ But like a foul misshapen stigmatic' (2.2.135-6). Richard Duke of York, the protagonist of *2 Henry VI* and *3 Henry VI*, emerges in these plays as an accomplished Machiavellian. The following soliloquy might as well have been Gloucester's because of its confidential tone, playful language and gleeful scheming:

A day will come when York shall claim his own,
And therefore I will take the Nevils' parts,
And make a show of love to proud Duke Humphrey,
And, when I spy advantage, claim the crown,
For that's the golden mark I seek to hit.
(*2 Henry VI*, 1.1.239-43)

There emerge some interesting similarities between the two Richards: York professes he 'will take the Nevils' parts', meaning he will ally with Warwick and Salisbury, the son and grandson of Sir Ralph Neville. But the phrase rings very close to 'I will take the Devil's part', which is what he does in making 'a show of love' to Humphrey of Gloucester. It is also what his son does in *Richard III*: 'And seem a saint, when most I play the devil'. Both father and son take on the role of the Devil, and introduce us to several layers of acting, as the Devil is a deceiver as well: they act the role of an actor. Better yet, in a theatrical context, there is an actor playing the role of Richard, who plays the role of the Devil, who plays the role of a

⁶⁵ Also known as *Mundus et Infans*, anonymous morality play printed by Wynkyn de Worde in 1522.

saint. It is a Chinese box of performances, which fits very neatly with Gloucester's sense of trickery and intrigue. In *3 Henry VI*, Richard emerges as a protagonist after his father's death, and makes it his heaven 'to dream upon the crown' (3.2.168). Enjoying the crown is 'the golden time' he looks for (3.2.127). The crown is 'the golden mark' York seeks to hit, and Gloucester torments himself 'to catch the English crown' (*3 Henry VI*, 3.2.179) and 'pluck it down' (195). They both envision the crown as something out of their reach for the time being, but will catch it or hit it when the time is right.

Although Margaret may emphasize the dissimilarity between Richard III and his father, she unknowingly makes a connection between the two when she reprimands Queen Elizabeth: 'Why strew'st thou sugar on that bottled spider/ Whose deadly web ensnareth thee about?' (*Richard III*, 1.3.241-2). York says in *2 Henry VI*: 'My brain, more busy than the labouring spider,/ Weaves tedious snares to trap mine enemies' (3.1.339-40). Richard is a spider; his father is like one. And they are both busy: Gloucester hopes that God will 'leave the world for me to bustle in' (1.1.152), makes three references to 'business' (1.3.353, 2.2.144, and 3.4.36) and says the night before Bosworth: 'to-morrow is a busy day' (5.3.18).

The likeness between Richard of Gloucester and Richard of York is perhaps also shown through York's indication that Gloucester is his favourite son. It is Richard who receives the greatest praise from his father: 'Richard hath best deserv'd of all my sons' (*3 Henry VI*, 1.1.17). The affection he has for his sons is perhaps most aptly expressed in his soliloquy before his death: Clarence receives no mention, Edward is mentioned once, but Richard is mentioned first and last: 'Three times did Richard make a lane to me,/ And thrice cried, "Courage, father! fight it out!"' (1.4.9-10) and again at 1.4.14-17. His prophecy a few lines further down also seems applicable to Gloucester: 'My ashes, as the phoenix, may bring forth/ A bird that will revenge upon you all;/ And in that hope I throw mine eyes to heaven' (1.4.35-7). Richard of Gloucester is that bird, a buzzard which 'prey[s] at liberty', as Hastings

terms it, unaware that Richard is his and Clarence's enemy (1.1.133). According to Margaret, Richard is the fulfilment of York's prophecy:

Did York's dread curse prevail so much with heaven
That Henry's death, my lovely Edward's death,
Their kingdom's loss, my woeful banishment,
Should all but answer for that peevish brat?
(*Richard III*, 1.3.190-3)

Here, 'but' means 'merely' or 'only'. 'Answer for' can mean either 'be responsible for' or 'suffer these consequences because of'.⁶⁶ The passage could mean York's curse was so well received in heaven that these sad events transpired only to produce such an insignificant malefactor as Richard, or, it could mean that because of York's curse, Henry, Edward and Margaret must suffer these consequences merely so 'that peevish brat' Richard could become the fulfilment of York's prophecy. The emphasis of Margaret's speech is nonetheless on Richard's inferiority and insignificance.

The main point in comparing Gloucester and York is to show that Richard takes after his father, especially in taking on a role as a devil. Richard, as we have seen, projects himself into that role, but York is also conscious of his devilish character, as shown above. He also hints at this when speaking of Jack Cade, whom he secretly hires to lead a revolt against the King: 'This devil here shall be my substitute' (3.1.371). The implication might be that Cade is a lesser substitute for a greater devil, York, but the line is open to interpretation. Richard of Gloucester, then, draws on two sources for his demonic character: the theatrical tradition of the Vice figure, and the example of his father in *2 Henry VI* and *3 Henry VI*.

2.3 The Development of the Composite Villain

In his analysis, Spivack goes far to show that Iago in *Othello* is a composite character which contains inhuman elements, and the same is the case for Richard in *Richard III*. Rather than a human character, he is a synthesis, or a fusion, of two characters: he is the man Richard who

⁶⁶ *OED*, 'answer' 1.b. and 6.

takes on the disguises of the Machiavel and the Vice, but he is also the allegorical personification of evil, disguised as a man. This duality of character, which Spivack finds in ‘a score of major figures in as many plays between 1585 and 1616’, is the source of the villain’s inexplicability with regards to motivation.⁶⁷ There is a discrepancy between the character’s behaviour and his explanation for his behaviour:

Their reasons have neither a logical correspondence with their actions, nor – what is more important – an emotional correspondence with their dramatic personalities. They express themselves as moved by resentment, ambition, hatred, professional and sexual jealousy, but they do not behave as if they were so moved. [...] Their one real emotion is an effervescent zest in the possibilities of mischief and a jubilant savoring of success therein.⁶⁸

In Richard’s case, this lack of passionate motivation is evident in several episodes in *Richard III*. His first move is towards his brother George, although Clarence is not next in line for the throne. He desires to marry Anne because of ‘a secret close intent’ which remains a secret (*Richard III*, 1.1.157-9). The suggestions that he marries her because he needs a queen or because it will strengthen his claim to the throne are only guesses. His attack on the Queen and her relatives is explained as a reaction to their roles as ‘factious for the house of Lancaster’ (1.3.126-31), but there is no sign of bitterness in Richard’s following soliloquy, only sheer enjoyment in seeming ‘a saint when most I play the devil’ (1.3.337). Richard’s motivation remains equivocal in the play, which does not make his character less vibrant and alive, but perhaps less credible as a realistic portrayal of human nature.

The very use of the epithet ‘villain’ may also be a hint that Richard is ‘inhuman’ in some way. Richard is referred to as a villain seven times in the play, three times by himself. According to Spivack, the term had achieved a generic status by the 1590s, substituting the allegorical Vice as a type. In *Othello*, Iago is simply listed as ‘a villain’ on the Folio’s *dramatis personae*, where other characters are mentioned by their profession. He is not only a villain in a moral sense, but also in an artistic or vocational sense. The figure of the villain became associated with the Vice of the morality play, not as a morally corrupt character, but

⁶⁷ Spivack, *Allegory of Evil*, p. 35.

⁶⁸ Spivack, *Allegory of Evil*, p. 35.

as an amoral character, intent on performing his function.⁶⁹ Don John in *Much Ado about Nothing* displays this desire to act in accordance with what he is, without explaining his actions by referring to motivation or passion:

I had rather be a canker in a hedge than a rose in his grave, and *it better fits my blood* to be disdain'd of all than to fashion a carriage to rob love from any. In this (though I cannot be said to be a flattering honest man) it must not be denied but I am a plain-dealing villain.
(1.3.27-32, my emphasis.)

Shakespeare draws a distinction between his villains, in Spivack's sense of the word, and his other criminal characters. In Spivack's view, Macbeth, Claudius, Iachimo and other malefactors in the plays are different from the villains in several ways: they have no appetite for the crime itself, but for the fruits of their crimes; they are restrained by their human passion and regret, which makes them debate their actions; they do not address themselves directly to the audience; and they do not identify themselves as representations of a type.⁷⁰ On this basis, one can make the argument that Richard, incorporating non-human elements in his character, has an incomplete human nature and, as a consequence, may lack a conscience. It is prudent to keep this objection in mind when discussing Richard's pangs of conscience in Act V of *Richard III*.

Another common factor in the characterization of Iago, Don John and Richard is the absence of an explanation for their evil. They resort to a very similar language when they address the question of what they are. Iago says simply, 'I am not what I am' (*Othello*, 1.1.65). Don John says 'I cannot hide what I am' (*Much Ado*, 1.3.13), and goes on to say he is 'a plain-dealing villain' (32), instructing his companion Conrade to 'let me be that I am, and seek not to alter me' (36-7). However, Don John does not attempt to explain his malignancy beyond referring to his status as villain. Richard, when awakening from his dream at Bosworth, tells us 'I am I' (*Richard III*, 5.3.183). These villains seem unable to avoid self-reference, never fully explaining their character. The phrase 'I am not what I am' functions as

⁶⁹ Spivack, *Allegory of Evil*, p. 56.

⁷⁰ Spivack, *Allegory of Evil*, pp. 39-43.

an inverted echo of God's response to Moses in the wilderness, 'I AM THAT I AM',⁷¹ and the villain shares some of God's mysterious nature: we do not know where he comes from, or why he is what he is. The question of the origin of evil is ultimately as unanswerable as the question of the origin of God. Theatrically, this representation of evil effectively evokes fear of the unknown, and as Henry James shows in his novella *The Turn of the Screw*, things that are never explained are simply more frightening. Skeet Ulrich's character Billy Loomis in the 1996 movie *Scream* expresses a similar sentiment, 'Did they really ever explain why Hannibal Lector liked to eat people? Don't think so. You see, it's scarier when there's no motive'.⁷² Although the villains may not be designed to achieve this effect, this shroud of mystery enhances our fascination with them and may compensate for any lack of credibility in their representation.

2.4 Conscience as a Character

Conscience itself appears as a character in some of the morality plays, a fact that requires some attention because conscience is represented as an external agent in several of Shakespeare's plays, most relevantly in *Richard III*. There exist morality plays from both before and after the Reformation, reflecting the theology of their times. John S. Wilks traces their development, especially regarding the role of conscience as it emerges in plays such as *The World and the Child*, *Impatient Poverty*, *Appius and Virginia*, *Conflict of Conscience*, *The Three Ladies of London*, and its sequel *The Three Lords and Ladies of London*. The change, as he sees it, is twofold. Conscience develops from being mainly a spiritual guide to repentance and salvation to becoming a tormentor of the soul.⁷³ Furthermore, conscience is increasingly presented as an aspect of an internal *psychomachia*, internalizing the moral

⁷¹ *Geneva Bible*, Exodus, 3. 14.

⁷² *Scream*. Dir. Wes Craven. Disney/Buena Vista. 1996. Excerpt quoted from *The Internet Movie Script Database* <www.imsdb.com/scripts/Scream.html> [accessed 27 July 2005].

⁷³ Wilks, *The Idea of Conscience*, p. 46; 49.

conflict of the protagonist.⁷⁴ The latter development is not, however, seen by Wilks as a significant sign of the change from a ‘scholastic’ to a ‘reformed’ ideology, but rather as an evolutionary result of the increasing naturalism of the theatre. The internalization of conscience *is* important, because it coincides with the corruption of conscience, as in *The Three Ladies of London*. Lady Conscience in this play is no longer just a representation of an abstract concept, but ‘a fully developed character in her own right’, with conscience as her dominant virtue.⁷⁵ Here the corruption of conscience depends on a view of human nature as itself corrupted, as conscience is part of that nature. The corruption of virtues in the play is interpreted by Lady Love

not as an offence against an *ordo naturae* of scholastic provenance, but as induced rather by a frailty implicit in nature itself, by which her corruption was made inevitable:

Yet never dead, and yet Love doeth not live,
Love that to losse in life her follie lent,
Folly the food whereon her frailtie fed
Frailtie the milke that Natures breast did give ...⁷⁶

By contrast, in the pre-Reformation morality *The World and the Child*, conscience is not internalized as a part of Manhood’s psyche, and it remains pure in spite of the corruption of Manhood, presenting itself ‘as a “techer of the spiritualete” and “all that be leders into light”’.⁷⁷ The later morality plays show a conscience which is corruptible, and teach that ‘ethical guidance, and ultimately salvation itself, depends upon a conscience enlightened and informed by the biblically revealed Word of God’.⁷⁸ There is an increasing scepticism in the late moralities to the ability of reason to derive knowledge from the natural world: it must be enlightened through revelation.

Wilks concludes that the autonomy of conscience as a character is derived from the allegorical form of the medieval drama, but it must also be acknowledged that conscience has

⁷⁴ Wilks, *The Idea of Conscience*, p. 54.

⁷⁵ Wilks, *The Idea of Conscience*, p. 67.

⁷⁶ Wilks, *The Idea of Conscience*, p. 73.

⁷⁷ Wilks, *The Idea of Conscience*, p. 46.

⁷⁸ Wilks, *The Idea of Conscience*, p. 76.

an objectified status because of the underlying scholastic perception of reality: conscience is not seen as an inherent part of human nature, but as an instrument of God for instruction and guidance. Shakespeare is likely to have known the theatrical traditions of conscience as a character, as he uses this as a motif in *The Merchant of Venice* and *Richard III*.⁷⁹

2.5 Developments in Characterization

Another important development in English drama between *Richard III* and *Macbeth* is perceptible in the art of characterization. Increasing psychological realism is evident in the protagonists. The soliloquy becomes a vehicle for revealing the innermost thoughts of a character, rather than merely a tool for exposition. Early attempts at soliloquy in Shakespeare are characterized by premeditation, as if the character already has thought through what he wants to say, and then presents it. Thought and speech are not simultaneous. It is obvious that Richard's opening speech is deliberate and deliberated, sequenced into the distinct rhetorical pattern of an argument:

Now is the winter of our discontent
Made glorious summer [...]

But I [...]

And therefore [...] (*Richard III*, 1.1.1-2; 14; 28)

He is 'determined to prove a villain' (1.1.30) before he says that he is, because plots have already been laid (32). What he presents to the audience are not thoughts that occur to him in the moment of speaking, but a premeditated and well-structured rhetoric. Richard's ocean metaphor is applied to the memories of war, which are 'in the deep bosom of the ocean buried' (4), but it is also applicable to his mind: his speech is hoisted up from the bosom of the ocean which is his soul. At the very end, Richard reiterates the image of the ocean where he says 'Dive, thoughts, down to my soul, here Clarence comes!' (41), indicating that 'all the

⁷⁹ Launcelot Gobbo in *The Merchant of Venice* and the two murderers in *Richard III* allude to the tradition of 'the interaction of the Mankind figure with his conscience' (Wilks, *The Idea of Conscience*, p. 76). The objectified conscience in *Richard III* is discussed further in chapter three.

clouds that low'r'd upon our house' (3) remain in the deep of his soul. Although it may seem that Richard is interrupted by Clarence's approach, he has finished his argument and closed it neatly by reaching back to the initial image. Rather than interrupting, Clarence enters on Richard's cue.

By contrast, the soliloquies in *Hamlet*, written some eight years later (*ca.* 1600), are characterized by a synchronicity between thought and speech. Hamlet's first soliloquy gives the impression of immediacy because of its inherent passion: 'O that this too too sallied flesh would melt,/ Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew!' (*Hamlet*, 1.2.129-30). A revealing difference is that the direction of the soliloquy changes in flux with Hamlet's associations. He does not follow an ordered argument, but interrupts himself with interpolations:

Why, she should hang on him
As if increase of appetite had grown
By what it fed on, and yet, within a month –
Let me not think on't! Frailty, thy name is woman! –
A little month [...]

Why she, even she –
O God, a beast that wants discourse of reason
Would have mourn'd longer – married with my uncle [...]

Within a month [...]
She married – O most wicked speed: To post
With such dexterity to incestuous sheets,
It is not, nor it cannot come to good,
But break my heart, for I must hold my tongue.
(1.2.143-47; 149-51; 153-59)

These are thoughts which are not presented deliberately by Hamlet, but by Shakespeare. To Hamlet, this is rather an overflow from a broken heart, an outburst of emotion in spite of his intention to hold his tongue. This is a result of a development in the representation of character, where the protagonist's subservience to the plot is exchanged for greater emphasis on the internal. Rather than exposition, it is a representation of inner turmoil. Hamlet is not aware of his own function in the play in the way that Richard is. Hamlet speaks for no other purpose than to relieve tension within himself, whereas Richard addresses an audience in need of explanation.

This difference becomes clearer when comparing Richard's outwardness to Iago's apparent inwardness, because both characters share familial bonds with the allegorical Vice, and thus have a similar functional role as 'villain'. Iago's first soliloquy may or may not be addressed directly to the audience, but it shares a synchronicity of thought and speech with the above passage from *Hamlet*:

Cassio's a proper man. Let me see now:
To get his place and to plume up my will
In double knavery – How? how? – Let's see –
After some time, to abuse Othello's ear
That he is too familiar with his wife.
He hath a person and a smooth dispose
To be suspected – fram'd to make women false.
The Moor is of a free and open nature,
That thinks men honest that but seem to be so,
And will as tenderly be led by th' nose
As asses are.
I have't. It is engend'red. Hell and night
Must bring this monstrous birth to the world's light.
(*Othello*, 1.3.392-404)

By resorting to indications of simultaneous thought like 'How? how? – Let's see', Shakespeare lets us understand that Iago primarily is addressing himself. Iago's plan is not thought out in advance and then presented, but 'engend'red' as he speaks. This changes the soliloquy from being a mode of exposition of plot to becoming a vehicle for psychological insight into the character's mind. Edmund in *King Lear*, by contrast, seems to present his deliberations in a fashion more similar to Richard's, as his speech is metrically stable, and his questioning seems to me rhetorical rather than an indication of a simultaneous thought process:

To both these sisters have I sworn my love;
Each jealous of the other, as the stung
Are of the adder. Which of them shall I take?
Both? one? or neither? Neither can be enjoy'd
If both remain alive (*King Lear*, 5.1.55-9)

Edmund's question 'Which of them shall I take?/ Both? one? or neither?' seems to be directed to the audience as much as to himself, and the scene may be acted with accompanying hand gestures and pauses to gain a humorous response.⁸⁰

The drama became increasingly psychological in the period of the great tragedies, coinciding with a shift in focus from external to internal conflict. In *Macbeth*, there is relatively little that happens in terms of action compared to the emphasis on the struggle within Macbeth's soul. In *Richard III*, however, this development can be seen contained in a single play, from the intrigues and murders of the first four acts to Richard's anguished soliloquy in 5.3.178-206. The speech is delivered in a staccato rhythm signalling immediacy and passion, and it is the first glimpse of Richard being unaware of his own performance. Spivack finds it necessary to distinguish Richard from Iago and other villains because he does not maintain his 'original character to the end', and Richard's speech is closer to introspection than exposition, showing an early attempt by Shakespeare to describe inner conflict.⁸¹ The psychologizing of the later drama coincided with an internalization of conscience, so that characters would speak about conscience as something within rather than as an external influence. In *King John*, Elinor says to her son the king: 'So much my conscience whispers in your ear,/ Which none but heaven, and you, and I, shall hear' (*King John*, 1.1.42-3). In this example, conscience is still considered a spiritual guide, whispering in one's ear. As the soliloquy became increasingly psychologically revealing, conscience was associated with consciousness, as in Hamlet's 'To be or not to be' soliloquy:

who would fardels bear,
To grunt and sweat under a weary life,
But that the dread of something after death,
The undiscover'd country, from whose bourn
No traveller returns, puzzles the will,
And makes us rather bear those ills we have,
Than fly to others that we know not of?
Thus conscience does make cowards of us all,

⁸⁰ For instance as in the RSC's production of *King Lear* in Stratford, July 2004.

⁸¹ Spivack, *Allegory of Evil*, p. 46. Spivack appears later to contradict his earlier statement, saying that 'the character of Richard remains consistent with itself from first to last' (p. 388).

And thus the native hue of resolution
Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought (Hamlet, 3.1.75-84)

Here, the distinction between conscience as the advocate of a moral imperative and as a process of introspective investigation is blurred, as some critics argue.⁸² Also, conscience no longer whispers in the ear, but is at the receiving end of whispers about guilty deeds:

O, 'tis too true!
How smart a lash that speech doth give my conscience!
The harlot's cheek, beautied with plast'ring art,
Is not more ugly to the thing that helps it
Than is my deed to my most painted word.
O heavy burden! (3.1.48-53, my emphasis)

Although conscience is a heavy burden also in *Richard III*, it is a burden which is manifested in the form of external pressure. To Clarence's Second Murderer, the burden of guilt is, ironically at first, represented by money:

1. Mur. Where's thy conscience now?
2. Mur. O, in the Duke of Gloucester's purse.
[...]

Like Judas, however, he repents and rejects the reward:

Take thou the fee and tell him what I say,
For I repent me that the Duke is slain. (*R III*, 1.4.126-7; 277-8)

To Clarence conscience takes the form of apparitions in a dream: 'Ah, Keeper, Keeper, I have done these things/ That now give evidence against my soul' (1.4.66-7). The burden is manifested in a similar manner to Richard, who later denounces his 'babbling dreams' (5.3.308), and transfers the manifestation to something he can control:

Conscience is but a word that cowards use,
Devis'd at first to keep the strong in awe:
Our strong arms be our conscience, swords our law!
(5.3.309-311, my emphasis)

To Richard, conscience is never internal, but something which manifests itself externally. By demoting conscience to the status of a limb, he can control its influence.

Whereas conscience is represented by money, ghosts, and arms in *Richard III*, conscience has no external manifestations in *Macbeth*. It is symptomatic of this that the word

⁸² See for instance Marjorie Garber, who proceeds to argue that '[Hamlet's phrase] contains both of its root meanings and yet goes beyond them, to express the essential condition of man' (*Dream in Shakespeare*, p. 89).

conscience is never used in the play, but instead the consequences of conscience are described in detail. *Macbeth* is more than any other Shakespeare play a study of the psychological effects of a guilty conscience, and treats conscience as a psychological and medical condition, 'a great perturbation in nature' (*Macbeth* 5.1.9), which primarily affects the present state of the characters. *Richard III*, by contrast, presents an eschatological perspective, in which the pangs of conscience are only a small taste of the punishment that awaits in the kingdom of perpetual night.

Chapter Three: Conscience as a Phenomenon in *Richard III* and *Macbeth*

When addressing conscience as a phenomenon, it is useful to keep in mind the origin of the word which is the Greek *phainomenon*, derived from *phainein*, ‘to show’, ‘to appear’ or ‘to be seen’. A phenomenon is something that appears to the senses or the mind.⁸³ That is a very proper designation of the term in the current context, because in the two plays we are examining, conscience appears as either a phenomenon arising from sense perception or as something that proceeds ‘from the heat-oppressed brain’, to borrow a phrase from *Macbeth*. Conscience in *Richard III* is represented as though it had a material presence, manifested in physical objects and characters, whereas conscience in *Macbeth* is visible primarily through the mental and physical deterioration of the main characters, lacking direct material representation.

Subchapter 3.2 is concerned with the ways in which conscience is described as a medical and psychological state and spiritual phenomenon in *Macbeth*, and especially how this corresponds to William Perkins’ descriptions of similar phenomena in *The Whole Treatise of the Cases of Conscience*, first published in 1606.

In 3.3, the discussion will centre on the function of conscience in *Richard III* and *Macbeth*, and focus on how the two plays differ in their emphasis on conscience as either witness or shared knowledge. Conscience as witness is central to the idea of a heavenly trial, where conscience testifies for or against the soul, based on the subject’s actions in life. Conscience as shared knowledge reaches back to the etymology of the word, *conscientia*, which means, in the words of the theologian William Perkins, ‘A knowledge ioyned with a knowledge’.⁸⁴ This conscience is an internal conscience of the soul, consisting of knowledge

⁸³ *OED*, ‘phenomenon’ 1.a.

⁸⁴ Perkins, *The Whole Treatise*, p. 44.

of what one has done. These two aspects of conscience may be contained in both *Richard III* and *Macbeth*, but each is emphasized differently in the two texts.

3.1.1 The Autonomy of Conscience in *Richard III*: Conscience as an External Agent

Conscience seems to enjoy a certain degree of autonomy in *Richard III*. By that I mean that the abstract concept of conscience acquires a status not unlike that of its personification in the morality plays. The difference is that in *Richard III*, the character of Conscience does not appear on stage, but he is in a sense talked about, and certainly alluded to at one point in the play. To a limited degree, conscience is brought back as a relic of the old plays in a similar fashion as Richard's role alludes to the morality Vice. Conscience is also treated as an abstract, but because it is mentioned by its name and made a subject of discussion, it also acquires a status of object. It becomes an object outside of the characters' minds, and can therefore be said to be externalized. To put it differently: conscience becomes an external and independent factor in the play because the characters *treat* conscience as an external and independent factor.

John S. Wilks points out that 'the interaction of the Mankind figure with his conscience' is mocked in the colloquy between the two Murderers in *Richard III*.⁸⁵ If not a parody, it is certainly a comic scene, and an allusion to an earlier tradition of externalizing aspects of the human soul. The conversation is here recounted in full:

2. *Mur.* What, shall I stab him as he sleeps?
1. *Mur.* No, he'll say 'twas done cowardly when he wakes.
2. *Mur.* Why, he shall never wake until the great Judgment Day.
1. *Mur.* Why, then he'll say we stabb'd him sleeping.
2. *Mur.* The urging of that word "judgment" hath bred a kind of remorse in me.
1. *Mur.* What? art thou afraid?
2. *Mur.* Not to kill him, having a warrant; but to be damn'd for killing him, from the which no warrant can defend me.
1. *Mur.* I thought thou hadst been resolute.
2. *Mur.* So I am – to let him live.
1. *Mur.* I'll back to the Duke of Gloucester and tell him so.

⁸⁵ Wilks, *The Idea of Conscience*, p. 76.

2. *Mur.* Nay, I prithee stay a little. I hope *this passionate humour of mine* will change. It was wont to hold me but while one tells twenty.

1. *Mur.* How dost thou feel thyself now?

2. *Mur.* Faith, *some certain dregs of conscience are yet within me.*

1. *Mur.* Remember our reward when the deed's done.

2. *Mur.* Zounds, he dies! I had forgot the reward.

1. *Mur.* *Where's thy conscience now?*

2. *Mur.* O, in the Duke of Gloucester's purse.

1. *Mur.* When he opens his purse to give us our reward, *thy conscience flies out.*

2. *Mur.* 'Tis no matter, let it go. There's few or none will entertain it.

1. *Mur.* *What if it come to thee again?*

2. *Mur.* I'll not meddle with it, it makes a man a coward. A man cannot steal, but *it accuseth him*; a man cannot swear, but *it checks him*; a man cannot lie with his neighbour's wife, but *it detects him*. 'Tis a *blushing shame-fac'd spirit* that mutinies in a man's bosom. It fills a man full of obstacles. *It made me* once restore a purse of gold that by chance I found. *It beggars any man that keeps it.* It is turn'd out of towns and cities for a *dangerous thing*, and every man that means to live well endeavors to trust to himself and live without it.

1. *Mur.* 'Zounds, 'tis even now at my elbow, persuading me not to kill the Duke.

2. *Mur.* Take the devil in thy mind, and believe him not; he would insinuate with thee but to make thee sigh.

1. *Mur.* *I am strong-fram'd*, he cannot prevail with me.

2. *Mur.* Spoke like a tall man that respects thy reputation. Come, shall we fall to work?

1. *Mur.* Take him on the costard with the hilts of thy sword, and then throw him into the malmsey-butt in the next room.

2. *Mur.* O excellent devise! and make a sop of him.

1. *Mur.* Soft, he wakes.

2. *Mur.* Strike!

1. *Mur.* No, we'll reason with him. (*R III*, 1.4.100-60, my emphasis)

In this conversation, there is clearly a notion of conscience as a manifest presence which comes to accuse, check, and detect. It has, however, a less personal presence here than in the morality plays where Conscience was one of the characters. The notion of conscience as a '[preacher] to us all' is presented in *Henry V* (4.1.9). Conscience is also 'a blushing shame-fac'd spirit' that can override a person's will: 'It made me once restore a purse of gold'. Even if conscience is not a proper character in the play, the old Conscience has a perceptible presence all the same: 'tis even now at my elbow'. It is indicative of its external status that conscience is not an internal faculty that causes blushing, but rather a spiritual presence that blushes and is 'shame-fac'd', and infects the subject through its example. The Quartos all have 'shamefast', which can mean bashful or ashamed. The Folio's 'shame-fac'd' is interesting because it gives conscience a face, or a persona in the original meaning of 'mask'.

A conscience with a persona is in a sense a character which has character. Conscience is represented as having a shy character, and can cause 'sighs' in the subject not through imperative commands but by a display of grief and dismay.

Conscience also has a certain locality which gives it presence: 'certain dregs of conscience are yet within me', 'Where's thy conscience now?', 'In the Duke of Gloucester's purse', 'What if it come to thee again?', and 'tis even now at my elbow' all reinforce the impression of a manifest presence and autonomy. It is a mobile spirit, which movement is not restricted by the human body. Although conscience can be located, it is transcendental in nature, whereas the body itself is defined and finite: 'I am strong-fram'd'.

The image of a conscience that can pass through the boundaries of the body gives it the status of an invader who must be fought off, a threatening outsider, as described in 1.4.141-2: 'It is turn'd out of towns and cities for a dangerous thing'.⁸⁶ It causes mutiny 'in a man's bosom', which indicates a disruption of microcosmic harmony in the body. Conscience does not belong *naturally* in the body, but rather it is an outsider who is acting on a divine imperative. In that sense, it is the antithesis to the Devil, and Conscience and the Devil are projected as an antithetical pair battling for the soul of man, one sitting on each shoulder, as depicted in popular culture imagery today, for instance in the *psychomachia* of Walt Disney's Donald Duck. This conflict is shown also in the above scene, where Second Murderer tells his companion to 'Take the devil in thy mind', as a protective measure against the influence of conscience. A similar idea of a good and a bad angel, where, presumably, the good angel is conscience, is expressed in *Othello*. Gratiano says of Desdemona's father after her death:

Did he live now,
This sight would make him do a desperate turn,
Yea, curse his better angel from his side,
And fall to reprobance. (5.2.206-9)

⁸⁶ The Quartos have 'it is a dangerous thing', but at the beginning of the speech at 134.

If Brabantio was alive to see his daughter dead, he would fall into despair, banish his conscience, and fall into damnation. ‘A desperate turn’ is likely to mean suicide, as this would certainly lead to damnation. ‘His better angel’, his conscience, would argue against suicide, and must be set aside. The term ‘better angel’ implies that there is another angel present who would counsel Brabantio ‘to reprobance’.



III. A.



III. B.

The comedy of this scene partly consists of the murderers switching the roles of the Devil and Conscience: Conscience is seen as the aggressive vice and the Devil as the relieving virtue. However, this inverted image is not maintained throughout the scene; the Second Murderer expresses doubts because his salvation is at stake (107), and repents the deed after it is done (278). The switching of roles is playful in a double sense because it brings attention to a situation where roles are played and played with. It reinforces the impression of conscience as a role in the play, and focuses attention on the characteristics of that role.

In Margaret's curse at 1.3.221 conscience is again referred to by name: ‘the worm of conscience still begnaw thy soul’. Conscience is described as a tormentor of the soul in the shape of a worm. The worm image is used elsewhere in Shakespeare as a symbol of decay and destruction, like a canker, as in Viola's account of a bashful lover: ‘she never told her love,/ But let concealment like a worm i' th' bud/ Feed on her damask cheek’ (*Twelfth Night*, 2.4.110-11). A worm was also thought to be the cause of toothache, gnawing at the roots of one's teeth, as in *Much Ado About Nothing*:

Don Pedro: What? sigh for the toothache?

Leonato: Where is but a humor or a worm.
(*Much Ado About Nothing*, 3.2.26-7)

In *1 Henry VI*, the worm is again a symbol of internal destruction: 'Civil dissension is a viperous worm/ That gnaws the bowels of the commonwealth' (3.1.72-3). The association with destruction from the inside is clear in *Richard III*, but the worm of conscience is still an external interference. Margaret's worm image is particularly a religious motif. The phrase is similar to a line in Jean Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, where it is said of the wicked that 'the worm of conscience, sharper than any cauterizing iron, gnaws away within'.⁸⁷ A possible origin of the phrase is Matthew 9:44, where Jesus says that

it is better for thee to enter life, maimed, then having two hands, to go into hel into the fyre that never shal be quenched, Where their worme dyeth not, & the fyre never goeth out.⁸⁸

The worm is explained in a marginal footnote as 'the paines, & eternal tormentes of the damned'.⁸⁹ In *Richard III*, the aspect of eternal torment beyond earthly life is made clear by the word 'still', meaning always. The association of conscience with a worm is again an image of a harmful intruder as in the murderers' colloquy, and also a reification of an abstract concept, giving presence and location to conscience.

Snake or worm images are also used in *Macbeth* in a way that may link the motif to conscience. After Duncan's murder, Macbeth says to his wife that 'We have scorch'd the snake, not kill'd it;/ She'll close and be herself, whilst our poor malice/ Remains in danger of her former tooth' (3.2.13-15), referring to the dangerous situation they are in. It appears that the real snake is in Macbeth's mind, in the form of his conscience which continues to haunt him. Macbeth says of the murdered Banquo and his son Fleance: 'There the grown serpent lies; the worm that's fled/ Hath nature that in time will venom breed,/ No teeth for th' present' (3.4.28-30). Although Macbeth's enemy is killed, the conclusion is that he still fears the snake. It is possible that he speaks of conscience here, as this is the cause for his subsequent

⁸⁷ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. by Ford Lewis Battles, ed. by John T. McNeill, in series The Library of Christian Classics, XX (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), p. 46.

⁸⁸ *Geneva Bible*, Matthew 9. 43-4.

⁸⁹ *Geneva Bible*, marginal footnote to Matthew 9. 44.

fears. Fleance is a worm still without venom, but Macbeth's dismissal of Fleance as a present danger is subverted earlier when he cries out that 'full of scorpions is my mind' (3.2.36), suggesting his mind is already 'poisoned' by conscience.

In *Richard III*, Richard turns conscience into a manifest object by giving conscience the status of limb, or more precisely, he gives his limb the status of conscience:

Conscience is but a word that cowards use,
Devis'd at first to keep the strong in awe:
Our strong arms be our conscience, swords our law! (5.3.309-11)

The effect, however, is the same: by promoting his arm to become his conscience, Richard shows himself as an unrelenting materialist who refuses an immaterial notion like conscience. By naming his arm 'conscience', the spiritual faculty that is conscience loses all meaning. Richard is shaken by his dream, as seen in 5.3.177-206, and refuses to accept conscience as a metaphysical reality over which he has no control. He equates conscience with something distinctly physical, his arm, over which he has full control. He asserts that conscience is only 'a word' that has been created, denying any notion of immateriality. It may be seen as a curious act of denial, but at the same time the statement materializes conscience. The same notion of conscience as a manifest object is evident in the words of one of his opponents, Oxford: 'Every man's conscience is a thousand men,/ To fight against this guilty homicide' (5.2.17-8). Although it is a figurative statement meaning that conscience is every man's strongest weapon against Richard, the figure follows the same pattern of reification as Richard's 'strong arms'.

When Richard awakes from his dream before Bosworth, he likens his conscience to a thousand witnesses at an imagined heavenly trial:

My conscience hath a thousand several tongues,
And every tongue brings in a several tale,
And every tale condemns me for a villain.
Perjury, perjury, in the highest degree;
Murder, stern murder, in the direst degree;
All several sins, all us'd in each degree,
Throng to the bar, crying all, "Guilty! guilty!" (5.3.193-199)

His conscience takes on the role as a witness for the prosecution, condemning him for his sins. The voices of his conscience are also the voices of his victims, which are heard in the dream sequences of Richard and Richmond alike. In the quoted passage there is a strong association between Richard's conscience and the ghosts, and the nature of ghosts in the play is therefore relevant to the discussion of conscience, especially whether or not they have a real presence. In *Macbeth* there are no other witnesses to the appearance of the ghost of Banquo than the protagonist himself. In *Hamlet*, other characters besides the Prince can see the ghost in the first act, but Hamlet the King is invisible to Gertrude in the bedroom scene. In each play, there remains a certain doubt as to whether the ghosts are real or imagined. In *Richard III*, however, there are two factors testifying to an actual presence of spirits. Although the dream sequence bears the mark of an emblem and is highly symbolic, the occurrence of the same ghosts in two separate dreams signals that the ghosts are not imagined by Richard. The ghosts were certainly acted on stage, and their reality is confirmed by the fact that there are two separate witnesses to their appearance. Also, Richard remarks that 'the lights burn blue' (5.3.180), a common sign of the presence of ghosts or the Devil.⁹⁰ The ghosts seem to have a material presence in the play, and their association with conscience contributes to the sense that conscience is physically manifested in *Richard III*.

The phenomenology of conscience in *Richard III* is characterized by its physicality. Conscience is not a mere abstract concept perceived as a feeling of remorse, but is represented by material objects such as a worm, Richard's arm, a thousand men or a thousand tongues. It is represented through the allusion to the medieval character of Conscience. It is represented by ghosts with a manifest presence, amplifying the personification of conscience. Through all these manifestations, conscience achieves an autonomy of representation which is distinctly different from its appearance as a phenomenon in *Macbeth*.

⁹⁰ *OED*, 'blue, a' 1.1.c.

3.1.2 Internalization of Conscience in *Macbeth*: Conscience as Feeling

As mentioned earlier, a striking feature of *Macbeth* is that although conflict of conscience is a central theme, the word is never used in the play. This is symptomatic of a play in which conscience is not externalized and objectified as it is in *Richard III*. Conscience is not spoken of or about directly, but it is still manifested through human emotion and perturbation of the mind. The phenomenology of conscience in *Macbeth* is internal, not external. Conscience cannot be seen as an invading force attacking a strong-framed body, but rather as an integral part of human nature. Conscience is rather a psychological phenomenon than a religious concept or allegorical personification. Its internalized status is evident in Macbeth's lack of awareness of his conscience. He can question his own feelings, but cannot find the cause of his disturbance because conscience has no physical manifestation. Macbeth can feel his conscience, but is unable to distinguish right from wrong:

This supernatural soliciting
Cannot be ill; cannot be good. If ill,
Why hath it given me earnest of success,
Commencing in a truth? I am Thane of Cawdor.
If good, why do I yield to that suggestion
Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair
And make my seated heart knock at my ribs,
Against the use of nature? (1.3.130-7)

He is unable to provide an answer to the question, as the distinction between right and wrong is blurred: fair is foul and foul is fair. That he sees his heart knocking at his ribs as 'Against the use of nature', in other words abnormal or unnatural, indicates an unawareness of how his conscience operates, or that it is conscience which afflicts him.

Both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth seem to believe sin requires two witnesses to be subject to conscience. Macbeth's 'The eye wink at the hand; yet let that be/ Which the eye fears, when it is done, to see' (1.4.52-3) and his wife's

Come, thick night,
And pall thee in the dunest smoke of hell,
That my keen knife see not the wound it makes,
Nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark (1.5.50-3)

testify to their desire to escape conscience. Their underlying understanding is that there is no guilt without witnesses, and if the culprit or heaven is blind, there is no witness to the crime. Macbeth can close his eyes, and Lady Macbeth can hope to close the eye of heaven, but conscience still comes to haunt them.

There is a contrast, then, between the representation of conscience in *Richard III* and *Macbeth*. In the first play, conscience manifests itself physically, as perceptible to the senses, and in *Macbeth* it appears as an aspect of the characters' humanity, internalized in their imaginations. They put their trust in the ability of their own sensual apparatus to shut conscience out, but since conscience has no perceptible manifestation in the play, they fail. Richard is able to retain a certain degree of humanity while abolishing conscience, because conscience is not an integral part of his nature, but rather an outside force. In *Macbeth*, there is a strong emphasis on conscience as an essential part of human nature in the form of internal knowledge, and Macbeth cannot rid himself of his conscience without losing his humanity.

There emerge two lines of thought about conscience from *Richard III* and *Macbeth*, as the description of the phenomenology of conscience shows how conscience is presented differently in the two plays. A preliminary conclusion may be that in general terms, conscience in *Richard III* is externalized whereas in *Macbeth* it is internalized. The following section is an attempt to show an affinity between the work of a proponent of reformist ideology, William Perkins' *The Whole Treatise of the Cases of Conscience*, and *Macbeth*. Perkins' description of the causes and effects of conscience makes an interesting comparison to Shakespeare's work from the same decade.

3.2 Ethical Psychology: William Perkins on Conscience and Melancholy

The Cambridge scholar, theologian and preacher William Perkins was among the most influential writers on the subject of moral theology in the sixteenth century. Six years Shakespeare's senior, he published his first work on conscience in 1597, called *A Discourse*

of *Conscience*. Following a tradition of casuistry where particular cases were illustrated by examples, he published a longer version of the first work in 1606 called *The Whole Treatise of the Cases of Conscience*. The work defines what conscience is, describes the various types of distress of conscience, how conscience is distinguished from melancholy, and how the distresses of conscience can be remedied. Of particular interest is his discussion of melancholy and conscience, because Perkins makes a connection between conscience and medical science. Conscience is described as a phenomenon relating to the physical condition of the body as well as to spiritual and mental health. There is a similar shift in emphasis in Shakespeare's writing, from the eschatological perspective of *Richard III* to the present time perspective in *Macbeth*, describing the effects of conscience on this life rather than the life eternal.⁹¹

Perkins draws a distinction between the effects of conscience and melancholy and defines each of them as discrete phenomena, although they can sometimes work together to produce effects on the mind and body. Perkins gives an etymological definition of conscience, which informs his interpretation of the phenomenon:

A knowledge ioyned with a knowledge; and it is so tearmed in two respects. First, because when a man knowes or thinks any thing, by meanes of Conscience, he knows what he knowes & thinks. Secondly, because by it, man knowes that thing of himselfe, which God also knowes of him. Man hath two witnesses of his thoughtes, God, and his owne conscience; God is the first and chiefest; and Conscience is the second subordinate unto God, bearing witnes unto God either with the man or against him.⁹²

A similar idea of conscience is found in *King John*, where its nature as privy knowledge between the subject and heaven is stressed: 'So much my conscience whispers in your ear,/ Which none but heaven, and you, and I, shall hear' (1.1.42-3). Conscience, according to Perkins, is knowledge, whereas melancholy is a physical condition:

[I]t is a kinde of earthie and blacke blood, specially in the splene, corrupted and distempered; which when the splene is stopt, conuaies it selfe to the heart, and the braine; and there partly by his corrupt substance, and contagious qualitie, and partly by corrupt spirits, annoyeth both heart and braine, beeing the seates and instruments of reason, and affections.⁹³

⁹¹ This difference between the plays is discussed further in 3.3.

⁹² Perkins, *The Whole Treatise*, p. 44.

⁹³ Perkins, *The Whole Treatise*, p. 191.

Melancholy is identified as one of the four humours of the body in the Galenic medical tradition, complemented by blood, choler, and phlegm. Perkins admits that the cause of this type of mental and physical distress is often not found in just melancholy or conscience, but rather proceeds as a coproduct of both:

[I]f we make examination of the estate of persons as are troubled with any of these five temptations we shall not usually find them single, but mixed together, especially Melancholy, with terror of Conscience or some other temptations. For the distraction of the mind will often breed a distemper in the body, and the distemper of the bodie likewise will sometimes cause distraction of mind. Again, Melancholy wil often be an occasion, (though no direct cause) of terror of conscience; & in the same manner the conscience touched and terrified with sense of the haynousnesse of sinne, and the Heaviness of Gods wrath, will bring distemper of bodie by sampathy, and cause Melancholie.⁹⁴

It would be imprudent to give an analysis of Macbeth's condition and attribute its cause to either conscience or melancholy, but the textual evidence certainly points to bodily distress as well as mental anguish. His question 'art thou but/ A dagger of the mind, a false creation,/ Proceeding from the heat-oppressed brain?' (2.1.37-9) is reminiscent of Perkins' description of the effects of melancholy:

For this humour being corrupted, it sends up noysome fumes as cloudes or mists which doe corrupt the imagination, and makes the instrument of reason unfit for understanding and sense. Hence followes the first effect, strange imaginations, conceits and opinions, framed in the minde [...].⁹⁵

In the same soliloquy Macbeth concludes that 'There's no such thing' as a dagger present: 'It is the bloody business which informs/ Thus to mine eyes' (2.1.47-9). This is one of the effects Perkins attributes to melancholy, as distinguished from the effects of conscience:

Affliction of Conscience is one thing, trouble by Melancholy is an other: and they are plainly distinguished thus. First, when the Conscience is troubled, the affliction it selfe is in the Conscience, and so in the whole man. But in Melancholy, the imagination is disturbed, and not the Conscience. Secondly, the Conscience afflicted, hath a true and certen cause, whereby it is troubled, namely, the sight of sinne, and the sense of Gods wrath; but in Melancholy the imagination conceiveth a thing to be so, which is not so: for it makes a man to feare and despaire, upon supposed and fained causes.⁹⁶

The vision of the bloody dagger (not likely to be seen by the audience because of the technical difficulties involved in showing a knife hovering in the air) seems to be in conformity with a state of melancholy according to Perkins, but the whole picture is more complex. The troubles

⁹⁴ Perkins, *The Whole Treatise*, p. 198-9.

⁹⁵ Perkins, *The Whole Treatise*, p. 192.

⁹⁶ Perkins, *The Whole Treatise*, p. 194.

of Macbeth have a 'true and certain cause', namely the murder of Duncan, and therefore seems to conform to Perkins' description of a troubled conscience. The cause of Macbeth's fear is not 'supposed or fained', but is directly linked to the planning and execution of his sovereign's murder.

More specifically, it is the 'sight of sinne' which causes a troubled conscience. There is a significant emphasis in *Macbeth* on the impact of seeing the crime, exemplified throughout the play. The already mentioned 'Stars, hide your fires' speech (1.4.50-3) introduces the danger which sight constitutes to Macbeth's peace of mind. The crime itself is that 'Which the eye fears' (53) with good reason, because sight is a key factor to the generation of conscience in the play. Lady Macbeth expresses the same anxiety before the murder: 'Had he not resembled/ My father as he slept, I had done't' (2.2.12-13). She also seems to be aware of conscience's property as joint knowledge between the individual and God, expressing fear of heaven witnessing her actions, as seen in 1.5.50-4. Macbeth continues to display fear of sight after the murder, saying that 'I am afraid to think what I have done;/ Look on't again I dare not' (2.2.48-9). The same fear of sight is displayed in the banquet scene after Banquo's murder, when Macbeth shouts out 'Avaunt, and quit my sight' (3.4.92) and 'Take any shape but that' (101). Macbeth has no fear of Russian bears or Hyrcan tigers, only of the vision of his murdered comrade. This is also one of the distinctions made by Perkins between conscience and melancholy:

Thirdly, the man afflicted in Conscience, hath courage in many other matters: but the Melancholike man feares every man, every creature, yea himselfe, and hath no courage at all, but feares, when there is no cause of feare.⁹⁷

According to Perkins' definition of a troubled conscience, it seems from this passage that Macbeth is afflicted by conscience rather than melancholy.

⁹⁷ Perkins, *The Whole Treatise*, p. 194.

There is an analogy to this preoccupation with the sight of sin in Sophocles' tragedy of *Oedipus Rex*. Oedipus is also unable to bear the sight of his deeds, leading him to gouge out his own eyes. Indeed, his crime of killing his father and marrying his mother is too grave for anyone to bear witness to, leaving everyone unable to 'see' the truth except the soothsayer Teiresias, who is blind. Acknowledgement of the crime is only afforded to the person who cannot physically see the results, and Oedipus must perhaps blind himself to maintain his sanity. Lady Macbeth engages in the same activity of acknowledgment through blindness, only able to see the blood on her hands in a state of somnambulism. Macbeth's and Lady Macbeth's crime is also an act of patricide, Duncan being the constitutional father of all his subjects, which Lady Macbeth also hints at in 2.2.12-13. Like Oedipus, Macbeth cannot bear the sight of his crime and resorts to a metaphorical bulbectomy when exclaiming 'What hands are here? Hah! they pluck out mine eyes' (2.2.56). Oedipus' union with his mother may also be alluded to in *Macbeth*: figuratively speaking, Macbeth commits an incestuous act with his 'parent' when he kills Duncan, expressed through the comparison to Tarquin's rape of Lucrece. Duncan is feminized in the play through this act of rape, and his androgynous nature is suggested through the imagery resorted to by Macbeth: 'The spring, the head, the fountain of your blood/ Is stopp'd, the very source of it is stopp'd' (2.3.98-9). The words 'head' and 'fountain' are perhaps distinctly masculine by their upward character, but the downward movement of 'spring' and 'source' may signify femininity as well as masculinity, giving associations to the vagina and birth as well as the penis and pollination.

These similarities between *Macbeth* and *Oedipus Rex* may be superficial, but there is also a resemblance on a more profound level. Both Macbeth and Oedipus act in response to a prophecy, but whereas Oedipus does everything in his power to avert the outcome of the prediction, Macbeth actively pursues its fulfilment. Predestination and free will are major themes in both plays, and the passing resemblances in the text only reinforce the notion that

Macbeth is a comment on and development of the same theme in the older play. What is perhaps even more significant in this comparison is the focus on the unnaturalness of the act. The murder of Duncan is not just murder, but a trespassing of the boundaries of the natural. Through the comparison of Duncan's murder to Oedipus' patricide and incest, the focus in *Macbeth* is shifted to the general trespass against nature itself, and not just the individual life of the King.

When taking a closer look at Perkins' text, *Macbeth* almost seems like a textbook example of a person suffering from what Perkins refers to as the violent distress of the mind. He mentions four types of 'distresse of minde', the first three being 'Distresse, arising of a divine temptation' (p. 106); 'Distresse, arising from outward afflictions' (p. 118); and 'Distresse, arising of the Tentation of Blasphemie' (p. 160):

The Fourth *Distresse of minde* is that, which ariseth *from a mans owne sinnes*, or rather, *from some one speciall sinne committed*. [...] The violent Distresse of mind, shewes it selfe by feares and terrours of the Conscience, by doubtings of the mercy of God, by lamentable and fearefull complaints made to others. [...] The violent distresse commeth from some actuall and odious sinne or sinnes done, which wound the conscience, and are the causes of great distraction of minde [...] Onely this must be remembred, that the greater sinns against the third, sixt, and seventh commandements, are the main and proper causes of violent distresses: and the more secret the sinne is, in regard of the practice thereof, the greater horror of Conscience it bringeth; and open offences doe not give so deepe a wound unto it, as secret and hidden sinnes.⁹⁸

The commandments mentioned by Perkins are the third, sixth, and seventh, following the Calvinist classification based on the Hebrew numbering:

Thou shalt not take the Name of the Lord thy God in vaine: for the Lord wil not holde him giltles that taketh his Name in vaine.
[...]
Thou shalt not kil.
[...]
Thou shalt not commit adulterie.⁹⁹

These are all sins committed by *Macbeth*: sacrilege, murder, and, figuratively, rape. The murder of Duncan is described by *Macduff* as an act of sacrilege: 'Confusion now hath made his masterpiece!/
Most sacrilegious murther hath broke ope/
The Lord's anointed temple, and stole thence/
The life o' th' building!' (2.3.66-9). Figuratively, *Macbeth* has broken into

⁹⁸ Perkins, *The Whole Treatise*, pp. 171-2.

⁹⁹ *Geneva Bible*, Exodus 20. 7;13-14.

God's temple, disregarding the holiness of God's name. He has literally committed murder, trespassing against the sixth commandment. He has also, again figuratively, committed rape, as he compares himself to Tarquin, Lucrece's assailant: 'wither'd Murder [...] thus with his stealthy pace,/ With Tarquin's ravishing strides, towards his design/ Moves like a ghost' (2.1.52; 54-6). There are several passages in *Macbeth* linking the work to *The Rape of Lucrece*. Macbeth links Duncan to Lucrece in his description after his death:

Here lay Duncan,
His silver skin lac'd with his golden blood,
And his gash'd stabs look'd like a breach in nature
For ruin's wasteful entrance; there, the murderers,
Steep'd in the colors of their trade, their daggers
Unmannerly breech'd with gore. (*Macbeth*, 2.3.111-116)

Silver is a symbol of virtue, being the colour of Diana, the goddess of chastity. Gold and red are often used interchangeably to signify the colour of blood and beauty. Etymologically, yellow and red are also connected. 'Gules' is a heraldic term for red, and is similar to the Norwegian word for yellow, 'gul'.¹⁰⁰ Duncan's 'silver skin' testifies to his virtue, as does Lucrece's, when her virtue attempts to 'stain o'er' beauty's red blushes 'with silver white' (56). The literal signification of Macbeth's description is that Duncan lies covered in blood after his murder, but the sexual connotations to the imagery invoke images of a rape: his 'gash'd stabs' are comparable to the female genitalia, open to 'ruin's wasteful entrance', which may signify the entrance and ejaculation of the male sex organ. The connection between waste and ejaculation is made in Sonnet 129, where 'Th' expense of spirit in a waste of shame' may signify the shame experienced after intercourse. 'Ruin's wasteful entrance' is wasteful in a double sense: it is a destructive act (laying waste) as well as an act without fruit or offspring (a wasted seed), and so Macbeth's shame is also linked to the fruitlessness of his crime, which he expresses later: 'Upon my head [the witches] plac'd a fruitless crown,/ And

¹⁰⁰ OED, 'gules'. In *Timon of Athens*, Timon says 'With man's blood paint the ground, gules, gules' (4.3.60).

put a barren sceptre in my hand' (3.1.60-1).¹⁰¹ Macbeth expresses his repentance with the same immediacy as Tarquin, who against himself 'sounds this doom,/ That through the length of times he stands disgraced' (*The Rape of Lucrece*, 717-8). Immediately after the murder, Macbeth expresses regret, calling his hands 'a sorry sight' (2.2.18) and wishing Macduff could 'Wake Duncan with thy knocking' (2.2.71).

The assailants' 'daggers/ Unmannerly breech'd with gore' (2.3.115-6) invoke images of the male organ covered in the visual evidence of the assault. As in *The Rape of Lucrece*, lines such as 'His silver skin lac'd with his golden blood' (*Macbeth*, 2.3.112) contain the dichotomy between silver and gold, symbolizing virtue and beauty. But whereas Duncan's 'golden blood' signifies value, royalty and beauty, it is also a symbol of death and destruction. The 'murderers' are 'Steep'd in the colors of their trade' because Lady Macbeth has attempted to shift the blame onto them: 'I'll gild the faces of the grooms withal,/ For it must seem their guilt' (2.2.53-4). This is the most explicit reference to blood as a symbol of guilt. The blood testifies against the grooms as material evidence of the murder. The 'golden blood' is also a symbol of shame, as it causes the grooms to 'blush', their faces being red with Duncan's blood. In my view, there are no practical reasons for Lady Macbeth to smear the grooms' faces with blood. The act does little apart from drawing attention to the motif of blushing. The colour red also has this quality in *Lucrece*, where Tarquin is received by Lucrece,

Within whose face beauty and virtue strived
Which of them both should underprop her fame.
When virtue bragg'd, beauty would blush for shame;
When beauty boasted blushes, in despite
Virtue would stain that o'er with silver white.
(*The Rape of Lucrece*, 52-6)

¹⁰¹ His 'barren sceptre' is easily associated with a sterile sex organ. In this speech, he clearly refers to his childlessness, but may very well also reflect on his fruitless acts.

Virtue borrows beauty's red colour to express shame (63). A red face, then, is an expression of shame as well as beauty, and the colour of blood also signifies shame in *Lucrece*: 'And blood untainted still doth red abide,/ Blushing at that which is so putrefied' (1749-50).

Lucrece is also alluded to in Lady Macbeth's summoning of 'thick night':

Come, thick night,
And pall thee in the dunest smoke of hell,
That my keen knife see not the wound it makes,
Nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark
To cry, 'Hold, hold!'
(*Macbeth*, 1.5.50-3)

She calls on the night to be so dark that heaven cannot see through it, which is similar to how Tarquin, as Night itself, would be so dark as to obscure the view of the stars, the moons 'twinkling handmaids, in the words of *Lucrece*:

Were Tarquin Night, as he is but Night's child,
The silver-shining queen he would distain;
Her twinkling handmaids too (by him defil'd)
Through Night's black bosom should not peep again.
(*The Rape of Lucrece*, 785-88)

Lady Macbeth's appeal is evidently answered as Banquo states that heaven's 'candles are all out' (2.1.5), and Macbeth recognizes that 'Now o'er the one half world/ Nature seems dead' (2.1.49-50). Similarly, Tarquin may acknowledge that 'The eye of heaven is out, and misty night/ Covers the shame that follows sweet delight' (356-7).

The similarities between *Macbeth* and *The Rape of Lucrece* draw attention to a similarity between Macbeth and Tarquin, although not on a literal level. Macbeth is not, after all, a rapist, but he goes through a similar emotional development as Tarquin. The significant parallel is that both offenders are conscious about the wrongfulness of their actions, and so they cannot claim ignorance of the severity of the crime. Their tragedies are similar, as they act against their values in spite of their better judgment. Tarquin premeditates 'the dangers of his loathsome enterprise' (184), and finds that as Collatinus 'is my kinsman, my dear friend,/ The shame and fault finds no excuse nor end' (238), and he is torn between 'frozen

conscience and hot burning will' (247). Likewise, Macbeth is fully aware of the vileness of the deed:

He's here in double trust:
First, as I am his kinsman and his subject,
Strong both against the deed; then, as his host,
Who should against his murtherer shut the door,
Not bear the knife myself. (1.7.12-16)

It is Tarquin's 'burning will' and Macbeth's 'vaulting ambition' which drive both men to act against their conscience, and they fit the description Franco Moretti gives of the tragic hero:

Just as tragedy is born from the dominating irruption of will over reason, so too the tragic hero is moved by a passion that compels him to act despite and against the cultural values that continue to inspire him.¹⁰²

It is significant that they act against values 'that continue to inspire them': the consciences of Tarquin and Macbeth remain active after the crime, as Tarquin 'departs a heavy convertite' (743), and Macbeth is haunted by his conscience throughout the play. They remain incapable of reconciling what they have done with what they still believe is right.

Macbeth fulfils all the criteria to be subjected to a 'violent Distresse of minde'. The fears resulting from his sins are referred to as 'rancors in the vessel of my peace' (3.1.66), and constitute 'the affliction of these terrible dreams/ That shake us nightly' (3.2.18-19), leaving him with the impression that 'full of scorpions is my mind' (3.2.36). He may even be subjected to an epileptic attack in the banquet scene, as Lady Macbeth suggests by 'my lord is often thus,/ And hath been from his youth [...] The fit is momentary, upon a thought/ He will be well again' (3.4.52-5). Epilepsy seems to be an illness which interested Shakespeare, as it is attributed to Othello and Julius Caesar in their respective plays. Fear is the most distinguished outward sign of Macbeth's conscience, and his fit, triggered by fear, is a symptom of his troubled conscience.

Solitude is dangerous in *Macbeth* and the doctor is aware of it. He instructs Lady Macbeth's gentlewoman to 'Look after her,/ Remove from her the means of all annoyance,/'

¹⁰² Franco Moretti, 'The Great Eclipse: Tragic Form as the Deconsecration of Sovereignty', in *Shakespearean Tragedy*, ed. by John Drakakis, (London: Longman, 1992), pp. 45-84 (p. 64).

And still keep eyes upon her' (5.1.75-7). They eventually fail to look after their Lady, judging by Malcolm's account, who reports the death of Macbeth's 'fiend-like queen,/ Who (as 'tis thought) by self and violent hands/ Took off her life' (5.9.35-7). She has apparently been afraid of solitude, not wanting to be alone in the dark: 'She has light by her continually, 'tis her command' (5.1.22-3). Earlier, Lady Macbeth extinguished light, cloaking herself in darkness so that heaven would not see her actions. Now she has grown increasingly afraid of the forces of that darkness, clinging to the light which also becomes her doom: by seeking the light she now illuminates her conscience which reflects like a mirror what she has done, and the acknowledgement of her crimes drives her to despair.

The perils of solitude are also treated by Perkins in his work. His example is that of Christ: 'when he was alone out of companie and societie, then did the Devill most maliciously assault him'.¹⁰³ A person in distress caused by either melancholy or conscience is more vulnerable to the attacks of the Devil, and solitude increases one's vulnerability. Perkins continues:

An other rule is this: If the distressed partie, be much possessed with griefe, of himselfe, he must not be left alone, but always attended with good companie. For it is an usuall practise of the Devill, to take the vantage of the place and time, when a man is solitarie and deprived of that helpe, which otherwise he might have in societie with others. Thus he tempted Eve, when shee was apart from her husband.¹⁰⁴

After Duncan's murder, Macbeth shuns the company of others: 'We will keep ourself/ Till supper-time alone' (3.1.42), and his wife remarks on this change of behaviour: 'How now, my lord, why do you keep alone,/Of sorriest fancies your companions making,/ Using those thoughts which should indeed have died/ With them they think on?' (3.2.8-11). Not only does Macbeth keep to himself, but he nurtures 'fancies' and destructive thoughts. Perkins writes of the symptoms of an afflicted mind:

The partie distressed, must never heare tell of any fearefull accidents, or of any that have bin in like, or worse case then himselfe is. For upon the very report, the distressed will fasten the accident upon it selfe, and thereby commonly will be drawne to deeper griefe or despaire. The

¹⁰³ Perkins, *The Whole Treatise*, p. 168.

¹⁰⁴ Perkins, *The Whole Treatise*, p. 104.

mind afflicted is prone to imagine fearefull things, and sometime, the very bare naming of the Devill, will strike terrour and feare into it.¹⁰⁵

The floating dagger and the ghost of Banquo may or may not be imagined by Macbeth, but both occur after a fearful report: the dagger appears after Banquo tells Macbeth of his dream about the ‘three weïrd sisters’ (2.1.20), and Banquo’s ghost only appears after Macbeth has learnt of his death and Fleance’s escape.

The remedy for a troubled conscience appears to be known to the Doctor in *Macbeth*, who is consulted by Macbeth after the sleepwalking scene:

[*Macb.*] How does your patient, doctor?
Doct. Not so sick, my lord,
As she is troubled with thick-coming fancies,
That keep her from her rest.
Macb. Cure her of that.
Canst thou not minister to a mind diseas’d,
Pluck from the memory a rooted sorrow,
Raze out the written troubles of the brain,
And with some sweet oblivious antidote
Cleanse the stuff’d bosom of that perilous stuff
Which weighs upon the heart?
Doct. Therein the patient
Must minister to himself.
Macb. Throw physic to the dogs, I’ll none of it. (5.3.37-47)

Again, Macbeth displays a lack of awareness of conscience, referring to it as ‘that perilous stuff/ Which weighs upon the heart’. Conscience remains an elusive and immaterial factor, escaping nominal status. Macbeth can identify his Lady’s memory of the murder as ‘a rooted sorrow’ and ‘the written troubles of the brain’, but not as conscience. The doctor has already stated that ‘more needs she the divine than the physician’ (5.1.74), and replies that in these cases ‘the patient/ Must minister to himself’. This is possibly an allusion to Luke, where Jesus says ‘Physicion, heale thy selfe’,¹⁰⁶ but the word ‘minister’, punning on ‘clergyman’ and ‘administering’, suggests a spiritual discomfort rather than a physical disease. It is the Doctor’s remedy which identifies Lady Macbeth’s condition as distress of conscience rather than melancholy. The distinction is defined by Perkins:

¹⁰⁵ Perkins, *The Whole Treatise*, p. 105.

¹⁰⁶ *Geneva Bible*, Luke, 4.23.

[I]maginations in the braine caused by Melancholy, may be cured, taken away, and cut off by meanes of Physicke: but the distresse of Conscience, cannot be cured by any thing in the world but one, and that is the blood of Christ, and the assurance of Gods favour.¹⁰⁷

By suggesting that Lady Macbeth must minister to herself, the Doctor means that she must consult ‘the divine’, asking forgiveness for her sins. Perkins identifies eight stages in the process of gaining assurance of salvation, and it appears that Lady Macbeth is still on stage one of this development:

First, to feele our inward corruptions. Secondly, to be displeased with our selves for them. Thirdly, to beginne to hate sinne. Fourthly, to grieve so oft as we fal and offend God. Fifthly, to avoid the occasions of sinne. Sixtly, to endeavour to doe our dutie, and to use good meanes. Seventhly, to desire to sinne no more. And lastly, to pray to God for his grace.¹⁰⁸

Lady Macbeth has shown no signs of displeasure with herself, only signs of an awareness of her corruption. We never see her passing beyond her own self-love, and she may despair because of her inability to despise herself. Still, a guilty soul will betray itself unconsciously, as the Doctor observes: ‘Unnatural deeds/ Do breed unnatural troubles; infected minds/ To their deaf pillows will discharge their secrets’ (5.1.71-3). A similar observation is made by Vaux in 2 *Henry VI*, who says of the dying Cardinal Beauford that ‘sometime he calls the King,/ And whispers to his pillow as to him/ The secrets of his overcharged soul’ (3.2.374-6). The guilty person who suffers from a heavy conscience is compelled to confess, even if no one is listening. The offender may confess privately although he is unwilling to beg for forgiveness, as Claudius does in *Hamlet*: ‘O, my offense is rank, it smells to heaven [...] Pray can I not [...] My stronger guilt defeats my strong intent’ (3.3.36; 38; 40). Lady Macbeth, likewise, suffers, but remains unrepentant.

Lady Macbeth’s obsession with washing her hands is comparable to the act of Pilate acquitting himself for the death of Jesus. Although not a direct allusion, the scene of hand-washing may have reminded contemporary audiences of similar scenes in the medieval cycle plays. In an N-town play, the scene is represented like this:

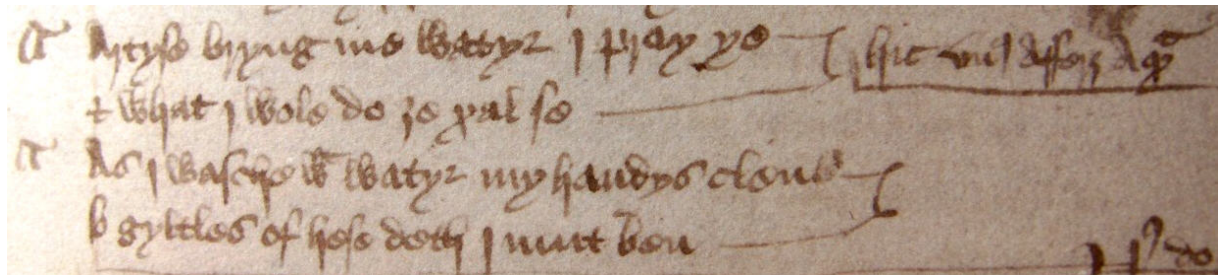
¹⁰⁷ Perkins, *The Whole Treatise*, p. 194.

¹⁰⁸ Perkins, *The Whole Treatise*, p. 194.

Artyse bryng me watyr, I pray þe,
And what I wole do 3e xal se.

*Hic vnus afferent aquam.*¹⁰⁹

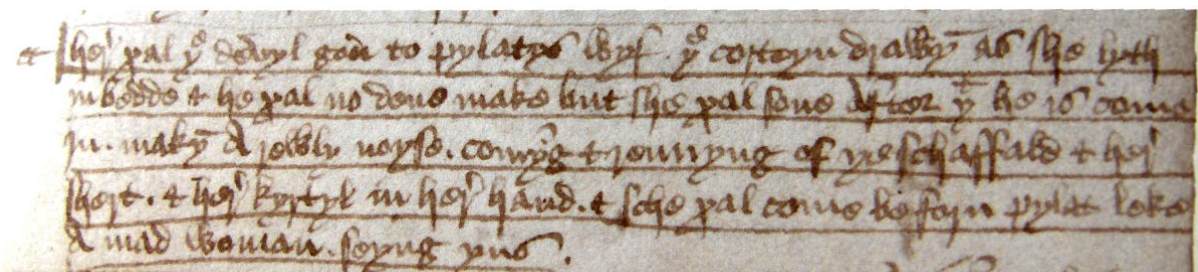
As I wasche with watyr my handys clene,
So gyltles of hese deth I mut ben.¹¹⁰



III. C.

Interestingly, this scene is preceded by a lengthy description of the dream of Pilate's wife, which is only mentioned in a single line in Matthew.¹¹¹ The stage direction reads:

*Here xal þe devil gon to Pylatys wyf, þe corteyn drawyn as she lyth in bedde; and he xal no dene make, but she xal sone after þat he is come in makyn a rewly noyse, comyng and rennyng of þe schaffald, and here shert and here kyrtyl in here hand. And sche xal come befor Pylat leke a mad woman [...]*¹¹²



III. D

This episode is reminiscent of two episodes in *Macbeth*: Lady Macbeth's invocation of spirits in 1.5.40-54 and her sleepwalking in 5.1. The description seems to be in concordance with

¹⁰⁹ The Latin phrase means 'This one [the actor playing Artyse] shall bring forth water'.

¹¹⁰ Stephen Spector (ed.), *The N-Town Play: Cotton MS Vespasian D. 8*, The Early English Text Society (supplementary series), 11 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 320-21.

¹¹¹ *Geneva Bible*, Matthew 27.19: 'Also when he was set downe upon the iudgement seat, his wife sent to him, saying, Have thou nothing to do with that iuste man: for I have suffered many things this day in a dreame by reason of him.'

¹¹² Spector, *The N-Town Play*, p. 317.

William Perkins' note on the perils of solitude, which says that 'it is an usuall practise of the Devill, to take the vantage of the place and time, when a man is solitaire and deprived of that helpe, which otherwise he might have in societie with others'.¹¹³ The close proximity of Pilate's wife's dream and Pilate's hand-washing in the passion play makes it an interesting analogy to the sleepwalking scene in *Macbeth*, where Lady Macbeth dreams and washes her hands, presumably with her hair down, a common way of representing 'A mad woman'.

In any case, the image of Pilate washing his hands seems to be a familiar one, judging from Richard's address to the nobles in *Richard II*:

Though some of you with Pilate wash your hands,
Showing an outward pity, yet you Pilates
Have here delivered me to my sour cross
And water cannot wash away your sin. (4.1.238-41)

The implication here is that the sin of Richard's nobles cannot be washed away with water, and it seems from this passage that this was how Pilate's act was interpreted as well. It certainly is the implication in *Macbeth*, where Lady Macbeth is unable to wash off her guilt:

Gent. It is an accustom'd action with her, to seem thus washing her hands. I have known her continue in this a quarter of an hour.
Lady M. Yet here's a spot.
[...]
Out, damn'd spot! out, I say! (5.1.28-35)

The Doctor clearly indicates that Lady Macbeth suffers from a sore conscience, not melancholy. However, as Paul H. Kocher has argued, it is melancholy which is invoked by the Lady when she addresses the spirits in Act 1:

Come, you spirits
That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,
And fill me from the crown to the toe topful
Of direst cruelty! Make thick my blood,
Stop up th' access and passage to remorse,
That no compunctious visitings of nature
Shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between
Th' effect and it! Come to my woman's breasts,
And take my milk for gall, you murth'ring ministers,
Wherever in your sightless substances
You wait on nature's mischief! (1.5.40-50)

¹¹³ Perkins, *The Whole Treatise*, p. 104.

The nature of these ‘spirits that tend on mortal thoughts’ has been much debated, and the passage is popularly interpreted as an invocation of supernatural evil. According to Kocher, however, the spirits are not devils, but

the animal spirits which Elizabethan psychology conceived of as communicating the decisions of the mind to the body. According to Robert Burton’s *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, ‘Spirit is a most subtle vapour, which is expressed from the blood, and the instrument of the soul, to perform all his actions; a common tie or medium betwixt the body and the soul, as some will have it.’ [...] Likewise when Lady Macbeth says just a few lines before the soliloquy in question, ‘Hie thee hither,/ That I may pour my spirits in thine ear’ (I.v.26-27), she obviously means nothing supernatural; she is planning figuratively that she will impart to Macbeth by persuasion the same ambitious courage that her animal spirits have given her.¹¹⁴

In her soliloquy she does not call for demons, but addresses the melancholic spirit of her mind, which will make her blood cold and dry, the properties of black bile. When blood turns cold and dry, it contracts and is made thick, stopping up ‘th’ access and passage to remorse’. Shakespeare uses a similar motif of coagulated blood which stops up the passage to conscience in *3 Henry VI*, where Clifford brushes off the pleading Rutland: ‘In vain thou speak’st, poor boy; my father’s blood/ Hath stopp’d the passage where thy words should enter’ (1.3.21-2). Conscience is in both cases presented as a bodily organ through which blood flows.

Lady Macbeth willingly steps into a melancholy state of mind to enable herself to kill, while at the same time disabling her conscience. Kocher argues convincingly that melancholy is a state of mind associated with criminals:

As Laurence Babb has well shown [Lawrence A. Babb, *The Elizabethan Malady* (East Lansing: Mich., 1965), pp. 56-58; 84], Elizabethans believed that melancholy was especially conducive to crime. Whatever else Lady Macbeth may mean in this difficult soliloquy, where the literal blends subtly with the metaphorical, she certainly is asking that her blood take on the grossness and thickness characteristic of melancholy. The association of crime with melancholy in Shakespeare’s mind appears clearly in the quite comparable passage in *King John* where the King broaches to Hubert the project of murdering young Arthur:

Or if that surly spirit, melancholy,
Had bak’d thy blood, and made it heavy, thick,
Which else runs tickling up and down the veins...
I would into thy bosom pour my thoughts. (III.iii.42ff.).

What Lady Macbeth adds to this orthodox idea is a somewhat novel physiological explanation of how melancholy aids crime: by so thickening the blood that it shuts off all access to conscience.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁴ Paul H. Kocher, ‘Lady Macbeth and the Doctor’, *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 5 (1954), 341-349 (p. 347).

¹¹⁵ Kocher, ‘Lady Macbeth and the Doctor’, p. 346.

Lady Macbeth uses the state of melancholy to bar her conscience from interfering. Ironically, though, by attempting to generate melancholy, she only activates her conscience: ‘She wills melancholia as an escape from conscience; she receives conscience, without melancholia. She would like to confuse the two; in the Doctor scenes Shakespeare carefully differentiates them’.¹¹⁶ Although William Perkins admits the two conditions may affect the same person simultaneously, the play describes conscience and melancholy differently, and the analysis indicates that Lady Macbeth only suffers from conscience.

There is a pronounced preoccupation with blood in *Macbeth*, and words related to blood occur 46 times in the play.¹¹⁷ The references to blood link the play with Judeo-Christian myths of sacrificial slaughter and blood as a symbol of life, death, and purification. Blood can be washed off with water, but the stain of sin can only be washed off with the blood of Christ, according to Perkins: ‘For no physicke, no art or skill of man, can cure a wounded and distressed conscience, but only the blood of Christ’.¹¹⁸ There is, however, no reference to the cleansing and redeeming qualities of blood in *Macbeth*. Lady Macbeth remains stained with the blood of Duncan, and apparently despairs at the end, according to Malcolm in the final speech. Macbeth himself is ‘in blood/ Stepp’d in so far that, should I wade no more,/ Returning were as tedious as go o’er’ (3.4.135-7). The image may be associated with a baptism in a river, and metaphorically speaking, Macbeth is baptized in blood when he kills Duncan, becoming a ‘man of blood’ (3.4.125). ‘Blood will have blood’ (121), Macbeth muses, a proverbial phrase which can either be about retribution or self-generation: murder requires satisfaction through payment in kind, or violence breeds violence.¹¹⁹ The first interpretation is probably correct here, as the immediate context is Macbeth’s fear of retribution from Banquo’s ghost. It is also the meaning invoked in George Peele’s *The Battle*

¹¹⁶ Kocher, ‘Lady Macbeth and the Doctor’, pp. 348-9.

¹¹⁷ Ghurye, *Shakespeare on Conscience*, p. 120.

¹¹⁸ Perkins, *The Whole Treatise*, p. 90-1.

¹¹⁹ Tilley, B 458.

of *Alcazar*: 'Bloud will have bloud, foul murther scape no scourge'.¹²⁰ However, the second interpretation is also possible, as Macbeth has been 'baptized' a murderer, and must continue on this course. Macbeth is a man who has no hope of redemption, and focuses rather on the inability of water to wash away the stain:

Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood
Clean from my hand? No; this my hand will rather
The multitudinous seas incarnadine,
Making the green one red. (2.2.57-60)

Despair is the ultimate type of distress according to Perkins, and suicide the ultimate act of despair: 'For every distresse in the minde, is a feare of condemnation, and comes at length to desperation, if it be not cured'.¹²¹ Macbeth, however, appears to have all the symptoms of an unrelieved conscience but does not despair, as is evident from his final speeches:

Why should I play the Roman fool, and die
On mine own sword? Whiles I see lives, the gashes
Do better upon them.
[...]
I will not yield,
To kiss the ground before young Malcolm's feet,
And to be baited with the rabble's curse.
Though Birnam wood be come to Dunsinane,
And thou oppos'd, being of no woman born,
Yet I will try the last. Before my body
I throw my warlike shield. Lay on, Macduff,
And damn'd be him that first cries, "Hold, enough!"
Exeunt fighting (5.8.1-3;27-34)

Macbeth ignores his own knowledge of the outcome of the fight, ready to 'try the last'. It would be futile to attempt to unravel the psychology behind his last action, but it is possible to interpret his last attempt as an act of defiance against fate and an expression of a persistent human will. He may still have the hope of winning the fight against Macduff and like Hamlet defy augury, and his defiant assertion of his will is what in my view makes him a hero. According to Perkins' descriptions, this defiance to the end is what damns Macbeth to hell,

¹²⁰ George Peele, *The Battle of Alcazar*, ed. by John Yoklavich, in *The Life and Works of George Peele*, gen. ed. Charles Tyler Prouty, 3 vols (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952-70), vol 2 (*Dramatic Works, 1961*), 1168 (Act 5).

¹²¹ Perkins, *The Whole Treatise*, p. 88.

and desperation would be the natural outcome of this situation. But Macbeth, who has acted ‘unnaturally’ throughout the play, defies the bounds of natural behaviour through a display of almost superhuman will. His last words are a confirmation of his speech at 3.4.135-7, making it clear that he prefers to cross the river of blood triumphantly rather than to return penitently.

The concurrences between *Macbeth* and *The Whole Treatise of the Cases of Conscience* are so many that it would be surprising if Shakespeare was unaware of the ideas propounded in Perkins’ work. In my view, it shows a different perception of conscience in *Macbeth* than what can be seen in *Richard III*; one which perceives conscience as an internal faculty rather than an external agent. The following section will concentrate on the functions of conscience in the two plays, and see how these functions contribute to the impression of ideological differences between the two views of conscience.

3.3 Conscience as Witness or Shared Knowledge

Different emphasis is laid on the role of conscience in the two plays, and what function it has as a mediator between earth and heaven. In *Richard III*, the emphasis is on its function as witness, and particularly as witness in an imagined trial. The theme is described in great detail in the scene of Richard’s dream at Bosworth, but receives its initial treatment in the scene of Clarence recounting his dream to the Keeper. In his dream, apparitions perform the role of his conscience, bearing witness to his crimes and accusing him:

The first that there did greet my stranger soul
Was my great father-in-law, renowned Warwick,
Who spake aloud, “What scourge for perjury
Can this dark monarchy afford false Clarence?”
And so he vanish’d. Then came wand’ring by
A shadow like an angel, with bright hair
Dabbled in blood, and he shriek’d out aloud,
“Clarence is come – false, fleeting, perjur’d Clarence,
That stabb’d me in the field by Tewksbury:
Seize on him, Furies, take him unto torment!” (1.4.48-57)

Clarence’s impression is that the deeds he has done for Edward’s sake ‘now give evidence against my soul’ (67). The apparitions become a material representation of his conscience

(within the context of the dream), witnessing against him before God and Devil. The image he invokes is a pagan representation of death in which Christian elements are mixed. He comes to the underworld where Charon ('that sour ferryman') takes the dead over the river Styx ('the melancholy flood'), but he sees 'a shadow like an angel', and is taken 'unto torment', mixing Christian and Pagan traditions. He imagines a trial (albeit a short one) held in 'the kingdom of perpetual night' where his conscience testifies against him.

Clarence's description of his own drowning may indicate that he senses his own damnation, and that he cannot redeem himself:

As we pac'd along
Upon the giddy footing of the hatches,
Methought that Gloucester stumbled, and in falling
Strook me (that thought to stay him) overboard
Into the tumbling billows of the main.
O Lord, methought what pain it was to drown!
(1.4.16-21)

There is no mention of Clarence's efforts to survive; he drowns immediately. His drowning appears as an unavoidable execution of judgment. This passage is in stark contrast to the simile used by Perkins to describe the repentant and God-fearing:

the servants of God are like to a man, by some suddaine accident cast into the sea, who in striving to save himselfe from drowning, puts to all his strength, to swim to the shore, and beeing come almost unto it, their meetes him a wave or billow, which drives him cleane back againe, it may be a mile or further, and then the former hope and ioy conceived of escape, is fore abated: yet he returnes againe, and still labours to come to the land, and never rests till he attaine unto it.¹²²

Clarence, then, seems to accept his guilt ('I have done these things' (1.4.66)), and has lost all hope of his own redemption, as he prays for the deliverance of his family: 'O God! if my deep pray'rs cannot appease thee,/ But thou wilt be aveng'd on my misdeeds,/ Yet execute thy wrath in me alone!/ O, spare my guiltless wife and my poor children!' (4.1.69-72).

A similar image of apparitions as accusing witnesses is presented in Richard's dream, but here the ghosts come to haunt him while he is still alive, as is evident from their command to despair and die in the battle ahead: 'in the battle think on Buckingham,/ And die in terror of

¹²² Perkins, *The Whole Treatise*, p. 185.

thy guiltiness! [...] despairing, yield thy breath!’ (5.3.169-70;172). When Richard wakes up, he interprets the dream as a premonition of a heavenly trial to come:

My conscience hath a thousand several tongues,
And every tongue brings in a several tale,
And every tale condemns me for a villain.
Perjury, perjury, in the highest degree;
Murther, stern murther, in the direst degree;
All several sins, all us’d in each degree,
Throng to the bar, crying all, “Guilty! guilty!” (5.3.193-199)
[...]
Methought the souls of all that I had murther’d
Came to my tent, and every one did threat
To-morrow’s vengeance on the head of Richard. (5.3.204-6)

Although the vision affects Richard state of mind, the impact of the outcome of the trial is on his afterlife. It portrays his everlasting judgment, and only gives a taste of the sentence he will receive. The imagery is filled with references to the court by the use of words and phrases like ‘tale’, ‘condemns’, ‘villain’, ‘perjury’, ‘stern murther’, ‘in the highest degree’, ‘bar’, and ‘guilty’, yet there is never an actual trial in the course of the play. Clarence’s account of his dream is also characterized by words and phrases from a trial: ‘scourge’, ‘perjury’, ‘afford’, ‘false’, ‘seize’, ‘torment’, ‘evidence’, ‘aveng’d’, ‘misdeeds’, ‘execute’, and ‘guiltless’.

Although the sentence they are given impact the present situation of both Clarence and Richard, the emphasis is on a judgment to come in the world hereafter. The motif of a heavenly trial and final judgment is also present in *King John*, where the emphasis is on actions as witnesses: ‘O, when the last accompt ‘twixt heaven and earth/ Is to be made, then shall this hand and seal/ Witness against us to damnation!’ (4.2.216-8). Sins as witnesses are also emphasized in the above passage from *Richard III* (‘All several sins [...] Throng to the bar’), but they are perceived as ‘tales’ told by his conscience’s ‘thousand several tongues’.

In *Macbeth* there is a different emphasis, although the theme of judgment is similar. Macbeth states that ‘mine eternal jewel/ [Is] Given to the common enemy of man’ (3.1.67-8), and that Duncan’s virtues ‘Will plead like angels, trumpet-tongu’d, against/ The deep

damnation of his taking-off' (1.7.18-20), but the focus is not on everlasting judgment. Rather, the emphasis is on the effects eternal judgment has on the present:

If th' assassination
Could trammel up the consequence, and catch
With his surcease, success; that but this blow
Might be the be-all and the end-all – here,
But here, upon this bank and shoal of time,
We'd jump the life to come. But in these cases
We still have judgment here, that we but teach
Bloody instructions, which, being taught, return
To plague th' inventor. This even-handed justice
Commends th' ingredience of our poison'd chalice
To our own lips. (1.7.2-12)

I read this passage as a representation of life as a static state, and time as a river which flows by. The image may therefore emphasize the innate passivity of life, and time as a catalyst of man's actions. Time is compared to a river, as murder is in 3.4.135-7, and Macbeth is mostly concerned with 'judgment here', on this bank and shoal of time, meaning life. The image seems to be one of time as a river, and the crossing of the river may remind us of Clarence's crossing of the 'melancholy flood' in *Richard III*, 1.4.45. In *Richard III*, the other side of the river is 'the kingdom of perpetual night' (1.4.47); in *Macbeth* it is eternity. Macbeth's initial thought is concern for the afterlife: 'here, upon this bank and shoal of time,/ We'd jump the life to come', but is quickly exchanged for concern about 'judgment here'. The punishment is realized in this life through a plagued conscience and desperation, as well as fear of retaliation, bloody instructions returning 'To plague th' inventor'.

Conscience acts as a tormentor rather than accuser in *Macbeth*, and takes the form of shared knowledge, as in Perkins' definition of the word. It has no material presence, but is internalized as an awareness of guilt. Lady Macbeth appears to be concerned about other people's knowledge of the murder in the sleep-walking scene, when she asks 'What need we fear who knows it, when none can call our pow'r to accompt?' (5.1.37-8). It may be a renunciation of the threat of knowledge, but the question may also be directed to herself as well as her husband. She assumes the spirits have managed to 'Stop up th' access and passage

to remorse' (1.5.44), and that her conscience thus has no knowledge of the crime, implying that it cannot call her to account. However, she immediately reveals that her conscience is still active: 'Yet who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him?' (5.1.39-40). It is as if her conscience speaks these words, and the speech bears the sign of multiple speakers in multiple contexts, jumping between different situations in the action. The incoherent speech alludes to six different scenes in the play in quick succession.¹²³

The nature of conscience as shared knowledge also emerges through her somniloquy, which imparts knowledge of the murder to the Doctor and the Gentlewoman. It is in the very nature of conscience to share or inform, and the Lady's conscience shares her knowledge while she sleeps. This uncontrolled and involuntary relief of the conscience is paralleled in *Hamlet*, where Hamlet says:

About my brains! Hum – I have heard
That guilty creatures sitting at a play
Have by the very cunning of the scene
Been strook so to the soul, that presently
They have proclaim'd their malefactions:
For murther, though it have no tongue, will speak
With most miraculous organ. (2.2.588-594)

A similar phenomenon is referred to in the scene of Ophelia's madness, where Horatio comments that 'Twere good if she were spoken with, for she may strew/ Dangerous

¹²³ 'One, two – why then 'tis time to do't' (35-6) alludes to 'A bell rings' (SD 2.1.61), as the bell is the signal for Macbeth to go to Duncan's room. 'Hell is murky' (36) alludes to 'Come, thick night,/ And pall thee in the dunest smoke of hell' (1.5.50-1), as both lines refer to the darkness of hell. 'Fie, my lord, fie, a soldier, and afeard?' (36-7) alludes to 'Art thou afeard/ To be the same in thine own act and valor/ As thou art in desire?' (1.7.39-41), as Lady Macbeth repeats her challenge to Macbeth's courage. 'What need we fear who knows it, when none can call our pow'r to accompt?' (37-9) alludes to 'Who dares receive it other,/ As we shall make our griefs and clamor roar/ upon his death?' (1.7.77-9), as it recaptures Lady Macbeth's earlier confidence, but also her fear of detection. 'What, will these hands ne'er be clean?' (43) alludes to 'My hands are of your color' (2.2.61) and 'A little water clears us of this deed' (2.2.64), and reiterates the motif of stained hands. 'The Thane of Fife had a wife; where is she now?' (42-3) alludes to the murder of Macduff's family (4.2), and is Lady Macbeth's clearest expression of compassion for the innocent. 'No more o' that, my lord, no more o' that; you mar all with this starting' (43-5) alludes to 'You have displac'd the mirth, broke the good meeting,/ With most admir'd disorder' (3.4.108-9), as she relives the banquet scene in her sleep. 'All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand' (50-1) alludes to 'Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood/ Clean from my hand?' (2.2.57-8), as it mirrors her husband's earlier statement. 'Wash your hands, put on your nightgown, look not so pale' (62-3) alludes to 'Go get some water,/ And wash this filthy witness from your hand' (2.2.43-4), and emphasizes her obsession with hand-washing. 'To bed, to bed' (66) alludes to 'Retire we to our chamber' (2.2.63), as she repeats her plea to Macbeth. Finally, 'there's knocking at the gate' (66-7) alludes to 'I hear a knocking/ At the south entry' (2.2.62-3), signifying the arrival of Macduff and Lennox.

conjectures in ill-breeding minds' (4.5.14-5). Gertrude replies in an aside: 'So full of artless jealousy is guilt,/ It spills itself in fearing to be spilt' (19-20).

The Gentlewoman's comment on Lady Macbeth's speech, 'heaven knows what she has known' (5.1.49), is at first glance a figure of speech, but on a level perhaps unknown to the speaker, it is a telling description of the situation. Her comment states that Lady Macbeth knows, and that heaven knows as well, despite the Lady's effort to keep heaven from peeping 'through the blanket of the dark' (1.5.53).

If there is an objective witness to sin in the play, it is not conscience, but blood. It is the crying blood of Duncan that testifies to Lady Macbeth's guilt: 'Yet who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him?' She attempts to quiet the blood's voice by washing the blood off. The Macbeths try to impart guilt on Duncan's grooms by smearing blood on their faces (2.2.53). Macbeth remarks that 'there's blood upon thy face' to the First Murderer (3.4.13), perhaps concerned that someone might see the evidence of violence. Banquo's ghost is likely to have blood on his face as well, appearing 'With twenty mortal murders' on his head (3.4.80). The blood motif is important in the play, and is introduced in the first scene with the entrance of a 'bleeding sergeant' (*SD* 1.2.1), referred to as a 'bloody man' by Duncan. Here, however, it is not a sign of sin, but a witness to the man's valour in battle. The same is the case with Macbeth, whose sword smokes 'with bloody execution' (1.2.18). The motif changes, however, to becoming a symbol of guilt, bearing witness to guilt rather than bravery. Macbeth goes from being bloody, 'brave Macbeth' to being a 'bloodier villain/ Than terms can give thee out' (5.8.7-8).

3.4.1 Free Will, Determination, and Conscience

Both Richard and Macbeth are protagonists who are 'determined' to act as they do, but perhaps in different senses of the word. Richard says of himself:

And therefore, since I cannot prove a lover

To entertain these fair well-spoken days,
I am determined to prove a villain
And hate the idle pleasures of these days. (1.1.28-31)

There is a contradictory double meaning contained in his phrase 'I am determined to prove a villain', as Janis Lull argues: 'His primary meaning is that he controls his own destiny. His pun also has a second, contradictory meaning – that his villainy is predestined – and the strong providentialism of the play ultimately endorses this meaning'.¹²⁴ In Lull's view, the providentialism of the play is shown through the fulfilment of Margaret's prophecies and the emphasis on Richard's rule as God's punishment on England for the civil wars:

Whether More [one of Shakespeare's sources for the play] saw Richard's rule as divine punishment is open to question, but there is no question that this interpretation is available in Shakespeare's play. It is articulated by Queen Margaret, who proclaims the justice of Richard's turning on his own family: 'O upright, just, and true-disposing God, / How do I thank thee, that this carnal cur / Preys on the issue of his mother's body' (4.4.55-7). [...] Margaret gives voice to the belief, encouraged by the growing Calvinism of the Elizabethan era, that individual historical events are determined by God, who often punishes evil with (apparent) evil.¹²⁵

However, Lull continues, *Richard III* complicates the question of providentialism and historical determinism by presenting the issue

not as an assertion, but as one side of an argument.
On the other side stands Richard himself, representing a secular theory of history that finds the causes of human events in individual actions rather than in providential will. Richard is both a stage 'Machiavel' and a personification of the Machiavellian view of history as power politics.¹²⁶

There are two ways of reading Richard's secondary meaning of 'determined': either as an intentional ironic statement, or as a dramatic irony of which Richard is unaware. The first interpretation is attractive because it supports the view of Richard as a sort of extra-dramatic character: he is aware of the dramatic context, and may comment on his own role not only in the play, but in history. This reading, however, is undermined by his lack of control in the latter part of the play, exemplified by his distraction and contradictory orders in 4.4.440-56. Here, Richard is contained by the drama, unable to stand outside as a commentator.

¹²⁴ Lull, introduction to *Richard III*, p. 8.

¹²⁵ Lull, introduction to *Richard III*, p. 6.

¹²⁶ Lull, introduction to *Richard III*, p. 7.

On the surface, Richard's double 'determination' may seem contradictory and paradoxical, at least if one views the play as an enactment of divine providence and punishment. However, 'I am determined to prove a villain' becomes a meaningful paradox if one sees the play as a battle between Richard's will and the force of providential history. On waking from his dream at Bosworth, Richard is confronted with the possibility of despairing in accordance with the command of the apparitions, but he refuses to repent or despair, choosing rather to be himself: 'I am I' (5.3.183). He prefers to die and be damned rather than repent and not be himself: 'March on, join bravely, let us to it pell-mell;/ If not to heaven, then hand in hand to hell' (5.3.312-3). Lull sees Richard's fate as a sort of tragic triumph; although he dies, he refuses to surrender his individuality to providential history:

By electing to remain himself, Richard insists on free will in the face of determinism. As Coriolanus banishes Rome rather than passively suffer banishment, so Richard assumes his predestined identity as his own choice. This interior moment is the play's final gloss on the paradoxical pun of the opening soliloquy. Richard is – he always has been – 'determined to prove a villain', and he refuses to surrender his own part of the pun, his human determination, to cosmic determinism. He has no choice, but he chooses anyway, and in this gesture against fate he partakes of tragic heroism.¹²⁷

Richard's will survives the pressure of determinism in the play, but what of his conscience? Richard's conscience has been discussed as a phenomenon, but it is also necessary to investigate how conscience relates to determinism. If Richard's actions are predetermined, the question arises whether conscience matters at all. Are one's actions subject to conscience if one cannot choose how to act? The answer may lie in Richard's insistence on choosing anyway, as Lull puts it, despite having no choice. Whether or not he can be held accountable for providential events, Richard *takes* responsibility for his own actions, refusing to let go of his determination in the face of determinism. His actions may not be subject to his conscience, as he seems to lack conscience and emphatically rejects it, but his actions are nevertheless subject to judgment.

¹²⁷ Lull, introduction to *Richard III*, p. 14.

Is Macbeth predetermined to do what he does, or does he have free will? Prediction is not the same as predetermination. The witches may be able to ‘look into the seeds of time’ (1.3.58), and see what Macbeth *will* do, but it does not put them in direct control of his actions. In order for Macbeth to be a true tragic figure, he must have a choice. It is an unanswerable conundrum: would he have murdered Duncan, Banquo and Macduff’s family anyway, had he not met the witches? It could be argued that Macbeth has thought of murdering Duncan before, but there is no evidence of this. Macbeth’s ‘my dull brain was wrought/ With things forgotten’ (1.3.149-50) could mean he has contemplated this earlier, but it may also be merely something he says to explain his distraction. Neither does ‘My thought, whose murder yet is but fantastical’ (139) mean that Macbeth has imagined the murder earlier; this thought may have arisen after he hears the prophecy.

One could argue it is irrelevant whether Macbeth acts because he hears the witches’ prophecy or not; it is Macbeth’s interpretation of the prophecy which determines his actions. He is not told that he will *kill* Duncan, but succeed him, yet the idea of murder occurs to him before he is told of Malcolm’s appointment as heir to the throne (1.4.37-8). Elizabeth Nielsen argues that succession of the eldest son was not automatic in Scotland; according to the laws of tanistry Macbeth may have been expecting his own appointment as heir to Duncan.¹²⁸ Nielsen also thinks it is likely Shakespeare knew of this alternative to primogeniture, since when he wrote *Hamlet*, ‘he wrote about a prince who did not inherit directly from his kingly father’.¹²⁹ In a reply to Nielsen’s article, Michael J. C. Echeruo counters her view by suggesting that even though these laws were in effect in Scotland and Denmark, Macbeth and Claudius are still presented as usurpers. He quotes the Lord’s reference to Malcolm: ‘The son of Duncan/ (From whom this tyrant holds the due of birth)/ Lives in the English court’ (3.6.24-6). Echeruo infers from this that ‘Surely the Lord would not speak of the “due of

¹²⁸ Elizabeth Nielsen, ‘*Macbeth*: The Nemesis of the Post-Shakespearian Actor’, *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 16 (1965), 193-199 (p. 193-4).

¹²⁹ Nielsen, ‘*Macbeth*: The Nemesis’, p. 194.

birth” if Malcolm’s claim rested only on the nomination by his father; that is, if Macbeth was originally entitled to the succession’.¹³⁰ Although Shakespeare was aware of the rules of the elective monarchy, Macbeth is still presented as a usurper in the play. Echeruo argues that Macbeth sees himself as a usurper also, as he favours primogeniture:

Macbeth expresses his fears that the sons of Banquo will succeed to the throne. We can surely take this to mean also that Macbeth’s sons should have succeeded him. The text is clear here:

Upon my head they plac’d a fruitless crown,
And put a barren sceptre in my gripe,
Thence to be wrench’d with an *unlineal hand*,
No son of mine succeeding.

(III .i. 63-63; my italics) [sic]

Whatever Shakespeare may have wanted us to feel, he at least allowed Macbeth to assume that direct succession was in some way right, possible and preferable: by implication, he too was rejecting the law of Scotland.¹³¹

It is difficult to resolve the questions of Macbeth’s feelings or his right to the throne; it will suffice to say that Macbeth feels guilty about his thoughts and actions. He uses the prophecy of the witches as a motive for the murder, temporarily relieving his conscience, as he could have chosen to act differently on the information. He later acknowledges the wisdom of Banquo, who has been more cautious and awaited the outcome of the prophecy: ‘to that dauntless temper of his mind,/ He hath a wisdom that doth guide his valor/ To act in safety’ (3.1.51-3).

Macbeth is not the only tragic hero who exploits predestination as an incentive to action: Hamlet similarly uses ‘providence’ to bypass his conscience. He acknowledges the difficulty of foreseeing the results of his plotting, and puts his trust in acting on impulse:

Rashly –
And prais’d be rashness for it – let us know
Our indiscretion sometime serves us well
When our deep plots do pall, and that should learn us
There’s a divinity that shapes our ends,
Rough-hew them how we will – (Hamlet, 5.2.6-11)

Hamlet says of his victims, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, that ‘They are not near my conscience. Their defeat/ Does by their own insinuation grow./ ’Tis dangerous when the baser

¹³⁰ Michael J. C. Echeruo, ‘Tanistry, the “Due of Birth” and Macbeth’s Sin’, *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 23 (1972), 444-50 (p. 448-9).

¹³¹ Echeruo, ‘Tanistry, the “Due of Birth” and Macbeth’s Sin’, p. 448.

nature comes/ Between the pass and fell incensed points/ Of mighty opposites' (58-62).

Hamlet is saying that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern caused their own deaths, as they interfered in the conflict between him and Claudius. However, by 'mighty opposites' he may also refer to higher powers, as he compares their 'baser nature' to an implicit higher nature. Hamlet rejects any responsibility for their deaths, as there is a 'divinity' that has determined their outcome as well as his. Before the duel with Laertes, Hamlet says 'There's a special providence in the fall of a sparrow' (5.2.219-20) and asserts that 'the readiness is all' (222). Whatever happens, he believes the result is in the hands of 'providence', and as long as he acts on impulse, he can act with a clear conscience. Horatio appears to be less than convinced by this reasoning, as he answers Hamlet's 'is't not perfect conscience/ To quit him with this arm?' (5.2.67-8) with an evasive 'It must be shortly known to him from England/ What is the issue of the business there' (71-2).

In my view, then, Macbeth uses the prophecy as an excuse to ignore his conscience, delegating the responsibility for his crimes to the prediction and ultimately to the witches. His choice of words betrays his rejection of his own culpability: 'Upon my head *they* [the witches] *plac'd* a fruitless crown,/ And *put* a barren sceptre in my gripe' (3.1.60-1, my emphasis). Macbeth speaks as if his choice of action could have had little impact on the outcome, and that he has become king against his own will.

3.4.2 The Conflict between Conscience and Will

In *Macbeth* there is a pronounced conflict between will and conscience throughout the play. As mentioned in chapter 1.1, Macbeth vacillates between his conscience and his purpose in a similar way as King John:

The color of the King doth come and go
Between his purpose and his conscience,
Like heralds 'twixt two dreadful battles set:
His passion is so ripe, it needs must break.
(*King John*, 4.2.76-9)

I have argued that conscience in King John and Hamlet is not the conflict of choice itself or a thought process, but one of the two poles between which the subject is drawn. King John must choose whether to follow his conscience, which tells him not to kill Arthur, or his ‘purpose’, which is to kill Arthur to ensure Prince Henry’s succession. He describes the conflict as a civil war within his body:

Nay, in the body of this fleshly land,
This kingdom, this confine of blood and breath,
Hostility and civil tumult reigns
Between my conscience and my cousin’s death.
(4.2.245-48)

In Macbeth, the conflict is similarly between conscience and purpose, as Lady Macbeth articulates it:

Stop up th’ access and passage to remorse,
That no compunctious visitings of nature
Shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between
Th’ effect and it! (1.5.44-47)

As shown earlier, ‘remorse’ is related to the faculty of conscience, and ‘compunctious visitings’ may be translated as remorseful influences on the mind.¹³² ‘Nature’ carries a double meaning in this phrase. On one hand, nature is the feeling of kinship which is invoked because Duncan is of Macbeth’s family. He calls Macbeth ‘valiant cousin’ (1.2.24) and ‘worthiest cousin’ (1.4.14), and Macbeth refers to the relationship as a strong objection to murder: ‘He’s here in double trust:/ First, as I am his kinsman and his subject,/ Strong both against the deed’ (1.7.12-4). Nature is often in Shakespeare related to kinship and familial sympathy, for instance in *Hamlet*, where the Ghost challenges Hamlet’s filial feelings: ‘If thou hast nature in thee, bear it not’ (1.5.81). Claudius is an ‘unnatural’ villain because he murders his brother: ‘Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder’ (1.5.25). In Holinshed’s history, Shakespeare’s source for *Macbeth*, both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are related to Duncan:

both Macbeth and the woman who became Lady Macbeth were of the royal family and had claim to the throne through this law [i.e. the law of succession under tanistry]. In fact, Lady Macbeth by

¹³² *OED*, ‘compunctious’ *a.* 1; ‘visiting’ *vbl. n.* 3b.

a former husband who had been killed in battle had had a son who would have been next in line to the throne had he not been killed by the alternating branch of the family to keep him from that throne.¹³³

Shakespeare may have been less rigid in adopting the facts of his sources, but Lady Macbeth's family relation to Duncan explains her own 'compunctious visitings of nature', and Holinshed's mention of her son from a previous marriage explains her reference to breastfeeding: 'I have given suck, and know/ How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me' (1.7.54-5). Similarly, Lady Macbeth fears that Macbeth's nature, his feelings of kinship towards Duncan, will shake his purpose.

Nature may also have a second meaning, although it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between the two: human nature, which is similar to the modern use of the word. When Lady Macbeth says 'Yet do I fear thy nature,/ It is too full o' th' milk of human kindness' (1.5.16-7), she means both human nature and familial feelings. His nature, in the modern sense, is too benign, and lacks 'illness' (20). Yet the other meaning is also contained in this phrase, as she alludes to it by the word 'kindness', which may be associated with kinship. The primary meaning, however, is human nature: 'nature' seems to have a more general application in 1.5.16, not confined to affinity with Duncan, but with 'humankind' at large.

Lady Macbeth's requests that the spirits 'Stop up th' access and passage to remorse' (1.5.44) and 'take my milk for gall' (48) have been interpreted by some critics as a literal description of a physical intervention in her body's humours. The body was thought to contain four fluids with different attributes: blood, black bile (excreted from the spleen), yellow bile (or gall, excreted from the gall bladder), and phlegm. Paul H. Kocher argues a literal interpretation in his essay on the topic, and suggests that Lady Macbeth is asking the spirits to manipulate her bodily functions.¹³⁴ However, it may be more instructive to view her language

¹³³ Nielsen, 'Macbeth: The Nemesis', p. 194.

¹³⁴ Kocher, 'Lady Macbeth and the Doctor', p. 348.

in this passage as imagery, in which she uses a well-known metaphor from Elizabethan physiology. Similarly, metaphor is used in the conversation between the two murderers in *Richard III*: 'I hope this passionate humor of mine will change' (1.4.117-8). In the Quartos, it is 'my holy humor'.¹³⁵ G. Blakemore Evans reads the phrase as 'compassionate mood', meaning that the Second Murderer feels pity for Clarence.¹³⁶ The 'passionate humor' is related to a feeling of conscience, as 'some certain dregs of conscience are yet within me' (1.4.121-2). It is unclear which humour induces feelings of conscience, but the main point is the executioner's materialist approach to conscience: conscience is presented as subject to the changes in the body's humours; matter is superior to spirit. This is not in conformity with the orthodox theological view, as Kocher shows:

Christian religion was bound to keep [conscience and melancholy] utterly distinct. Conscience warned of spiritual right and wrong; melancholia was merely a disease springing from the bodily humours. To equate the two, or even to think of the latter as causing the former, would make soul subject to body and undermine the central Christian doctrines of sin and repentance. Numbers of divines, consequently, spoke up against the danger, echoing in their sermons and treatises on conscience Bright's warning that guilt of conscience was emphatically not the same as melancholia but was a spiritual state requiring a spiritual remedy. [...]

So did John Yates in *Gods Arraignement of Hypocrites*:

And therefore those are to be condemned, which make the terrors of conscience nothing but melancholie, and thereby labour to benumme the sense of that sting which sinne euer carrieth in the tayle, and turne men to their usuall pleasures. ... [from John Yates, *Gods Arraignement of Hypocrites* (Cambridge: 1615), p. 351]¹³⁷

The subjection of conscience under the bodily humours adds to the materialist attitude in *Richard III*, as discussed in subchapter 3.1.1.

Besides the sense perception of conscience, conscience is also felt as a burden of sin by the conspiring couple, but more so after the deed. Angus assures the rebel army that 'Now does he feel/ His secret murthers sticking on his hands' (5.2.16-7). The blood of Duncan remains on the hands of Macbeth, not literally, but as a stain of sin invisible to the eye. Macbeth renounces the sight of his own crime several times (1.4.50-4; 2.2.49; 2.2.56) and has thus disabled himself from seeing the blood, but still able to feel it 'sticking on his hands'.

¹³⁵ Textual note to *Richard III*, 1.4.117-8.

¹³⁶ G. Blakemore Evans, footnote to *Richard III*, 1.4.118.

¹³⁷ Kocher, 'Lady Macbeth and the Doctor', pp. 343-4.

Lady Macbeth, senseless in her sleepwalking and like Macbeth, blind, can sense the stains on her own hands without actually seeing them. Earlier Macbeth and Lady Macbeth have been concerned about witnesses to their crime, and have reduced conscience to something which is induced through sense perception. But conscience eventually penetrates the boundary of sense, and takes the form of knowledge induced by the imagination. Pangs of conscience emerge as ‘rancors in the vessel of my peace’ (3.1.66) and scorpions in the mind (3.2.36).

Lady Macbeth seems to struggle less with her conscience in the early scenes, as she invokes ‘spirits/ That tend on mortal thoughts’ to ‘unsex’ her (1.5.40-41) and ‘Stop up th’ access and passage to remorse’ (44). The reality of the spirits is debatable, but the psychological effect may nevertheless be very real: Lady Macbeth’s invocation of spirits is a way of transferring guilt from herself, leaving responsibility with a supernatural power. Macbeth, however, must struggle with his conscience from the beginning. The very first line he speaks is a description of his and Banquo’s present situation: ‘So foul and fair a day I have not seen’ (1.3.38). The immediate meaning is that the day is fair because they have won the battle, and foul because of the bad weather, indicated by thunder (SD 1.3.1). The line, however, is also indicative of the internal conflict which is to follow, as well as a reminder of the witches’ chant in the first scene (1.1.11). Macbeth first contemplates the choice between good and evil in his aside after meeting the witches with Banquo:

This supernatural soliciting
Cannot be ill; cannot be good. If ill,
Why hath it given me earnest of success,
Commencing in a truth? I am Thane of Cawdor.
If good, why do I yield to that suggestion
Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair
And make my seated heart knock at my ribs,
Against the use of nature? Present fears
Are less than horrible imaginings:
My thought, whose murder yet is but fantastical,
Shakes so my single state of man that function
Is smother’d in surmise, and nothing is
But what is not. (1.3.130-142)

The encounter with the witches and the prophecy he has heard ‘Cannot be ill; cannot be good’. It is a negation which is reminiscent of the witches’ ‘Fair is foul, and foul is fair’

(1.1.11), and which emphasizes the conflict between two opposing values: his ambition and his moral virtue. Ambition is not described as a sinful quality in *Macbeth*, but rather as that which leads to greatness: Lady Macbeth says of her husband that 'Thou would'st be great,/ Art not without ambition' (1.5.18-9) and thinks it is cowardly not to let action follow desire: 'Art thou afeard/ To be the same in thine own act and valor/ As thou art in desire?' (1.7.39-41). Ambition is presented differently by Hamlet, who lists ambition as one of his many flaws:

Get thee to a nunn'ry, why wouldst thou be a breeder of sinners? I am myself indifferent honest, but yet I could accuse me of such things that it were better my mother had not borne me: I am very proud, revengeful, ambitious, with more offences at my beck than I have thoughts to put them in, imagination to give them shape, or time to act them in. (Hamlet, 3.1.120-26)

Hamlet's moral seems to be one of Christian, perhaps even Puritan, humility, rather than Macbeth's militant warrior ethic. In *Macbeth*, 'good' and 'ill' become blurred categories, as both courses of actions are 'good' within their own value systems. Macbeth's conscience is not the faculty with which he solves his dilemma, but one of the choices he is presented with. It is his 'thought' which is conflicted: shall he follow his conscience or his ambition? He is still conflicted when he sees his wife, and is initially unwilling to let her pour her spirits in his ear. He postpones the confrontation: 'We will speak further' (1.5.71), and then avoids it: 'We will proceed no further in this business' (1.7.31). His conversion is the result of his wife's insistent equation between ambition and valour, and her emphasis on ambition as a male virtue.

In *Macbeth*, there is a discrepancy between thought and action which seems impossible to reconcile, not least to Macbeth himself. He expresses the difficulty, or impossibility, in motivating his deeds: 'I have no spur/ To prick the sides of my intent, but only/ Vaulting ambition' (1.7.25-7). He cannot find a reason for action, but as Franco Moretti writes of *Hamlet*: 'The reason for Hamlet's inaction, we should say, is that within the tragic

universe there is never a reason for action'.¹³⁸ This is not to say that actions cannot have motives, but the search for motives signals a conflict in the protagonist's mind. According to Moretti, tragic action is triggered by passion rather than reason, and

Just as tragedy is born from the dominating irruption of will over reason, so too the tragic hero is moved by a passion that compels him to act despite and against the cultural values that continue to inspire him.¹³⁹

Action is here understood as a passionate response rather than the end result of reasoning and deliberation – a response in spite of rather than because of the thought process which precedes action. I have argued that Macbeth acts in accordance with an alternative ethic of ambition, but the conflict between his ambition and his reasoning is nevertheless manifested. Macbeth seems to realize his mind's opposition to the deed, as he sunders the relationship between sight and action: 'The eye wink at the hand; yet let that be/ Which the eye fears, when it is done, to see' (1.4.52-3). Macbeth also sunders the relationship between thought and action: 'Strange things I have in head, that will to hand,/ Which must be acted ere they may be scann'd' (3.5.138-9). Macbeth is unable to act on the grounds of what he has planned, and when the occasion presents itself, he is 'unmade', unable to act on his own reasoning:

When you durst do it, then you were a man,
And to be more than what you were, you would
Be so much more the man. Nor time, nor place,
Did then adhere, and yet you would make both:
They have made themselves, and that their fitness now
Does unmake you. (1.7.49-54)

Macbeth, then, cannot reason his way into action, as he only finds objections to the act: 'He's here in double trust' (1.7.12) and 'this Duncan/ Hath borne his faculties so meek, hath been/ So clear in his great office, that his virtues/ Will plead like angels, trumpet-tongu'd, against/ The deep damnation of his taking-off' (16-20). The gap between reason and action is maintained throughout the play, and Moretti presents an ingenious gloss on Macbeth's speech at 5.5.17-28:

¹³⁸ Moretti, 'The Great Eclipse', p. 65.

¹³⁹ Moretti, 'The Great Eclipse', p. 64.

Macbeth's dilemma is that coexisting in him are the imperative of power *and* the imperative of culture, will and reason together [...] This co-presence of irreconcilable drives deprives his life of a unified meaning: 'It is a tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, / Signifying nothing' [...] what remains is only 'sound', the word without force, and 'fury', force without sense. This is, in miniature, the lesson of the tragic structure as a whole.¹⁴⁰

In Moretti's view, 'Sound and fury' captures the essence of Macbeth's dilemma, as it describes his inability to connect his thoughts to his actions. Meaning is lost when action does not correspond with thought, and Macbeth has chosen to act before thinking. His thoughts 'will to hand', but must be acted before they are considered because there is no link between the two: action has become independent of reflection. This rejection of deliberation is most apparent in his decision to move against Macduff, which lacks an apparent motive. He has been told to beware of Macduff, but not his family, and the decision seems rash and whimsical:

Time, thou anticipat'st my dread exploits:
The flighty purpose never is o'ertook
Unless the deed go with it. From this moment
The very firstlings of my heart shall be
The firstlings of my hand. And even now,
To crown my thoughts with acts, be it thought and done:
The castle of Macduff I will surprise,
Seize upon Fife, give to th' edge o' th' sword
His wife, his babes, and all unfortunate souls
That trace him in his line. No boasting like a fool;
This deed I'll do before this purpose cool.
But no more sights! (4.1.144-55)

'From this moment' Macbeth will act as soon as the thought is conceived, before he can reflect upon it. Dramatically, this is also revealed in the structure of Act 4, where the attack on Fife follows immediately upon Macbeth's conception of the idea. 'The very firstlings of my heart' are not fully developed thoughts, but infant ideas unformed in the mind. There will be 'no more sights': the sights refer to the images he has presented of what he is to do. From now on Macbeth's purpose translates directly into action without being *imagined*; the deed is done before the image of it is formed and expressed in words.

Macbeth contains many unusual 'un'-forms, such as 'unseam'd', 'unfix', 'undone', 'unsex', 'unmake', 'unbend', 'unprovokes', 'unwiped', 'unlineal', 'unmann'd', 'unsanctified',

¹⁴⁰ Moretti, 'The Great Eclipse', p.64.

‘untitled’, ‘unwelcome’, ‘unrough’, ‘unbatter’d’, and ‘undeeded’. The many forms may signify a number of things: an atmosphere in the play of ‘un-action’ which resists Macbeth’s ambition; a reversal of creation through destruction, in which things are never done, only undone, suggesting that Macbeth’s actions can never bear fruit but only bring despair; or an emphasis on the definitiveness of Lady Macbeth’s ‘What’s done cannot be undone’ (5.1.68). It also reinforces the dichotomy between the natural and the unnatural, which is a dominant motif in the play.

Macbeth solves his dilemma by acting before he can reflect, and has no further scruples of conscience after the murder of Macduff’s family. It is his way of bypassing conscience, which, I suspect, he realizes is a product of reflection. It is the same conclusion Hamlet arrives at, who can kill Claudius in the heat of passion, on impulse, but cannot kill as a result of deliberation. Richard in *Richard III*, by contrast, is untroubled by any such conflict. If Macbeth is a man acting before reflection, Richard is a man acting *without* reflection. His lack of motivation has already been addressed, and he never has second thoughts about his actions after the fact. In the end, what happens to conscience in *Richard III* and *Macbeth* is very similar: conscience is reason’s judgment of actions, and it is vanquished from the drama as soon as the link between reason and action is severed. Still, Richard’s and Macbeth’s development follow opposite trajectories. Richard is the conscienceless, unreasoning murderer who is confronted with an intrusive, external conscience at the end of the play, and Macbeth is the conscientious ‘gentleman’ who loses his conscience when he rejects his reason.

3.5 The Role of the Equivocator

The equivocator is an important motif in *Richard III* and *Macbeth*. Equivocation is ‘To mean one thing and express another’, and an obsolete application of the word is ‘To use a word in more than one application or sense; to use words of double meaning; to deal in

ambiguities'.¹⁴¹ It was a well-known tactic used by Jesuits in particular, who were persecuted by the English government in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries: 'At seminaries on the Continent, pupil-priests were instructed in the ways and means by which they could, with a good conscience, equivocate or dissimulate in order to escape arrest when they came to England'.¹⁴² The object of equivocation was to avoid revealing the truth while at the same time avoid direct lies. Jesuits were supported by their superiors in the effort to mask the truth if they were persecuted for their beliefs. The reference to the equivocator knocking on 'Hell Gate' in *Macbeth* may be an allusion to the much publicized trial of Father Garnet, a Jesuit priest who became associated with equivocation because of his stubbornness in interrogation:

Knock, knock! Who's there, in th' other devil's name? Faith, here's an equivocator, that could swear in both the scales against either scale, who committed treason enough for God's sake, yet could not equivocate to heaven. O, come in, equivocator. (*Macbeth*, 2.3.7-11)

Through equivocation, Jesuits were able to perform their duty to their order and to God without committing perjury, and could therefore hide the truth with a clear conscience. To Jesuits, this was a way of defending their cause and their own conscience when being questioned by the authorities. In *Richard III*, however, equivocation is not used as a defence strategy. Richard equivocates quite voluntarily as a means of mocking and deceiving his victims. He reveals the truth to them without their knowledge, for instance in the scene with the Prince of Wales:

Glou. [*Aside*] So wise so young, they say do never live long.
Prince What say you, uncle?
Glou. I say, without characters fame lives long.
[*Aside*] Thus, like the formal Vice, Iniquity,
I moralize two meanings in one word. (3.1.79-83)

The meaning of the phrase is double; the meaning intended for the prince is that without a written record of what has happened, fame still lasts long through the oral tradition, as the prince suggests: 'Methinks the truth should live from age to age,/ As 'twere retail'd to all posterity,/ Even to the general all-ending day' (3.1.76-8). What Richard is also suggesting, is

¹⁴¹ *OED*, 'equivocate' v., 3 and 4.

¹⁴² Thomas, 'Cases of Conscience', p. 32.

that without moral qualities, infamy lasts a long time. This is a reference to himself, as he will build his reputation on wickedness. What Richard says afterwards, however, is not an equivocation: '[*Aside*] Short summers lightly have a forward spring' (3.1.94). This fails to qualify as equivocating for two reasons: it is not intended for anyone else to hear, as it is an aside, and the meaning is too transparent to be misunderstood – hence the aside. Richard equivocates in his exchange with Clarence in the first scene: 'your imprisonment shall not be long,/ I will deliver you, or else lie for you' (1.1.114-5). The meaning intended for Clarence is that he will be released from prison by Richard. Richard is not lying, however, as he plans to kill Clarence, and thus shortening his imprisonment. He will deliver him or lie for him: Clarence interprets this as a figure of speech, but Richard does indeed lie for him. The First Murderer explains the hidden meaning of Richard's deliverance:

Clar. It cannot be, for he bewept my fortune,
And hugg'd me in his arms, and swore with sobs
That he would labor my delivery.
1. Mur. Why, so he doth, when he delivers you
From this earth's thralldom to the joys of heaven.
(1.4.244-8)

Similarly, Richard equivocates when he says before the king that 'I do not know that Englishman alive/ With whom my soul is any jot at odds/ More than the infant that is born to-night' (2.1.70-2). It is true: he does not know any 'Englishman alive' with whom he has a quarrel, as Clarence is already dead. He also makes a reference to the 'tardy cripple' (90) who bore the countermand, not revealing that this is a fitting reference to himself. Richard explicitly draws attention to his own equivocation in 1.3 as he does in 3.1:

Marry, as for Clarence, he is well repaid;
He is frank'd up to fatting for his pains –
God pardon them that are the cause thereof!
(1.3.312-14)

Rivers calls this 'A virtuous and Christian-like conclusion – / To pray for them that have done scathe to us' (315-6), and Richard replies: 'So do I ever – (*speaks to himself*) being well

advis'd;/ For had I curs'd now, I had curs'd myself" (317-8). When Richard is alone again, he describes what he has just done:

Clarence, who I indeed have cast in darkness,
I do beweepe to many simple gulls –
[...]
But then I sigh, and, with a piece of scripture,
Tell them that God bids us do good for evil:
And thus I clothe my naked villainy
With odd old ends stol'n forth of holy writ,
And seem a saint, when most I play the devil.
(1.3.326-7; 333-7)

Richard employs equivocation as a playful device to mock his enemies. He tells them the truth, yet leads them to misinterpret his meaning. Richard's equivocation is voluntary and playful, and in this he distinguishes himself from Macbeth as well as the Jesuitical practice of equivocation as a last resort when questioned under pressure. Macbeth, however, uses equivocation more seriously to avoid confrontation while at the same time trying to avoid perjury. He becomes a parallel figure to the Porter's equivocator when he is questioned by Macduff and Lennox:

Macd. Is the King stirring, worthy thane?
Macb. Not yet.
[...]
Macd. I know this is a joyful trouble to you;
But yet 'tis one.
Macb. The labor we delight in physics pain.
[...]
Len. Goes the King hence to-day?
Macb. He does; he did appoint so.
Len. The night has been unruly. [...] Some say, the earth
Was feverous, and did shake.
Macb. 'Twas a rough night.
(2.3.45; 48-50; 53-4; 61)

All these equivocations imply that Macbeth seeks to add no further burden to his guilt, as he deliberately avoids lying. He answers 'Not yet' to the first question, which may contain the hidden meaning: Duncan will not stir until the Last Judgment. Secondly, Macbeth replies to Macduff's request: 'The labor we delight in physics pain'. To Macduff, this may seem to be a subservient reference to Duncan's wisdom, as Duncan expresses a similar view earlier:

The love that follows us sometime is our trouble,
Which still we thank as love. Herein I teach you
How you shall bid God 'ield us for your pains,

And thank us for your trouble. (1.6.11-4)

The meaning is similar to something like 'virtue is its own reward'. But Macbeth's phrase may have a more sinister meaning: that the fruits of the crime heal the wounds caused by the execution of the deed. On Lennox's question 'Goes the King hence to-day', Macbeth first answers 'he does', then seems to catch himself, correcting the answer to 'he did appoint so'. Alternatively, Macbeth may mean to say that Duncan's soul goes to heaven. The last example is a major understatement, as Lennox describes the strange occurrences that have happened and Macbeth replies 'Twas a rough night'. Macbeth may be commenting Lennox's description, but his curt reply suggests that he refers to the horrible events within the castle, which are yet undisclosed.

The motif of equivocation is used very differently in the two plays. For Richard, it is an expression of contempt of his victims and a playful device to make their fate ironic. For Macbeth, equivocation expresses his need to suppress the truth combined with his distaste for lies: his practical sense is pitted against his moral values. His equivocation emphasizes the conflict in his soul, which is put into words by Lady Macbeth:

Thou wouldst be great,
Art not without ambition, but without
The illness should attend it. What thou wouldst highly,
That wouldst thou holily; wouldst not play false,
And yet wouldst wrongly win. Thou'ldst have, great Glamis,
That which cries, 'Thus must thou do,' if thou have it;
And that which rather thou dost fear to do
Than wishest should be undone.
(1.5.18-25)

Macbeth is ambitious and wants greatness, but not through wickedness; he will not play false, but wants to win wrongfully; he does not object to the deed, but fears to perform it himself. Macbeth's equivocation in 2.3 shows how he resolves the conflict between his ambition and his conscience, as he cannot lie and betray his conscience, yet cannot reveal the truth and betray his ambition.

Conclusion

When I began the work of investigating conscience in the works of Shakespeare, it quickly became apparent that there is a great variety of uses of the word, extending beyond the area of ethics. The analysis of these alternative applications later became chapter one, as I deemed the discussion necessary to an understanding of the multiplicity of meanings contained in the word. It is evident from the discussion that conscience may have several meanings that are unfamiliar and alien to today's readers of Shakespeare. The word does not only signify a capacity for moral judgment, but may signify other mental faculties such as intellect, reason or opinion. The examples included in the analysis illustrate the difficulty of identifying the exact meaning of conscience in a given passage, and enjoin caution in applying modern definitions of the term to its uses in Shakespeare's plays. Other applications of the word are metaphorical or transferred applications, in which conscience shares some of the attributes of the object described. I felt it was important to include these peripheral applications in order to illustrate some of the properties of conscience as a moral category. For instance, the moral conscience may be perceived as a defence against evil because of its association with armour. Conscience is also flexible as leather or can vary in volume as a container, which indicates the mutability and individuality of ethical boundaries.

These varieties of conscience led me to think that there might be differences in how conscience was understood in strictly moral terms. The second objective of the thesis has been to demonstrate how conscience emerges as a moral phenomenon in *Richard III* and *Macbeth*. Some interesting differences emerge: in *Richard III*, conscience manifests itself through physical objects and functions as an external agent influencing the actions of the characters. Conscience attains a status in the play similar to that of the allegorical character Conscience in medieval plays. In *Macbeth*, conscience manifests itself internally through human emotions and actions, and is an intangible and invisible force which nevertheless affects the reactions

and actions of the characters. The representation of conscience in *Macbeth* appears to be influenced by theological currents of the time, and the descriptions of the causes and effects of conscience are similar to those of the contemporary theologian William Perkins. Extra-dramatic factors may also have influenced different representations of conscience in *Richard III* and *Macbeth*. The former play displays a kinship with an earlier theatrical tradition characterized by the characters' awareness of the play context, interaction between protagonist and audience and a superficial representation of the inner life of the characters. *Macbeth* evinces a greater depth in characterization, and the psychological realism approaches that of modern drama.

In the discussion, I have attempted to answer *how* conscience is represented differently in the two plays. To a certain degree, I have also tried to establish why these differences exist. This may be an interesting area for someone else to explore in a different thesis, and I will only pose the question here: are the representations of conscience in the plays related to how their protagonists view the world? Richard is a materialist who is only willing to accept the existence of material objects and the impact of human actions. He presents us with a reductionist view of conscience as he refuses to acknowledge the relevance of anything which is not manifested physically: conscience is 'but a word', and ghosts are only 'babbling dreams'. Macbeth, on the other hand, is a man open to the supernatural and the metaphysical. He acknowledges the existence of ghosts, witches, dark manipulating forces and the fulfilment of ill omens and prophesies. The world of *Richard III* is different from the world of *Macbeth*. An interesting question in this respect would be whether the representation of conscience in each play is a consequence of the protagonist's perspective, and whether the representation of the play world can be regarded as a projection of the same perspective, or whether Richard and Macbeth are products of the plays' respective realities.

I have said that both plays explore the paradox of determinism and free will, but there is no resolution of this debate in the plays. Critics have alternated between emphasizing the downfall and tragedy of these ‘villain heroes’ or their triumphs against deterministic forces through making choices and asserting their wills. I would argue that both arguments may be valid, depending on the perspective. These plays present specific worldviews, and the protagonists adapt their perspectives on that world to make living and dying tolerable. Dying is not always a tragedy, and Richard rejects life at the end as he can only triumph in death: ‘I have set my life upon a cast,/ And I will stand the hazard of the die’ (*Richard III*, 5.4.9-10).

Hopefully, the analysis has cast some light on the different roles and functions of conscience in *Richard III* and *Macbeth*. Conscience is in a sense caught in the middle of the paradox of unavoidable destiny and Man’s free will. In some contexts, as I argued in the discussion of *The Tempest* in chapter one, conscience loses its relevance when there is no real freedom of choice. Alternatively, it can become an agent of predestination, acting as the voice of God, directing people’s actions. A third possibility is that conscience may function as a catalyst for the rejection of a deterministic Weltanschauung, and spur the undeterred assertion of free will. My fascination with *Richard III* and *Macbeth* is in part due to my impression that all three interpretations of the functions of conscience are viable options, as there are no given answers to what the nature of conscience is.

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